

KUMO KAGYU

ILLUSTRATION BY
NOBORU KANNATUKI



GOBLIN SLAYER





Happiness is budding grapevines,
a hillside alive with dancing blue butterflies,
and the autumn's harvest moon
a brooch upon the neck of the Earth Mother.

When the flowers bloom and bear fruit in
all their glory,
with my beloved on the second starry night,
with the birdsong of the forest for dawn bells,
I feel the gentle touch of the Earth Mother.

The sweet yet bitter nectar
lights a flame in my heart
spanning the stars with the twin moons;
the joyous song of the Earth
Mother is calling.

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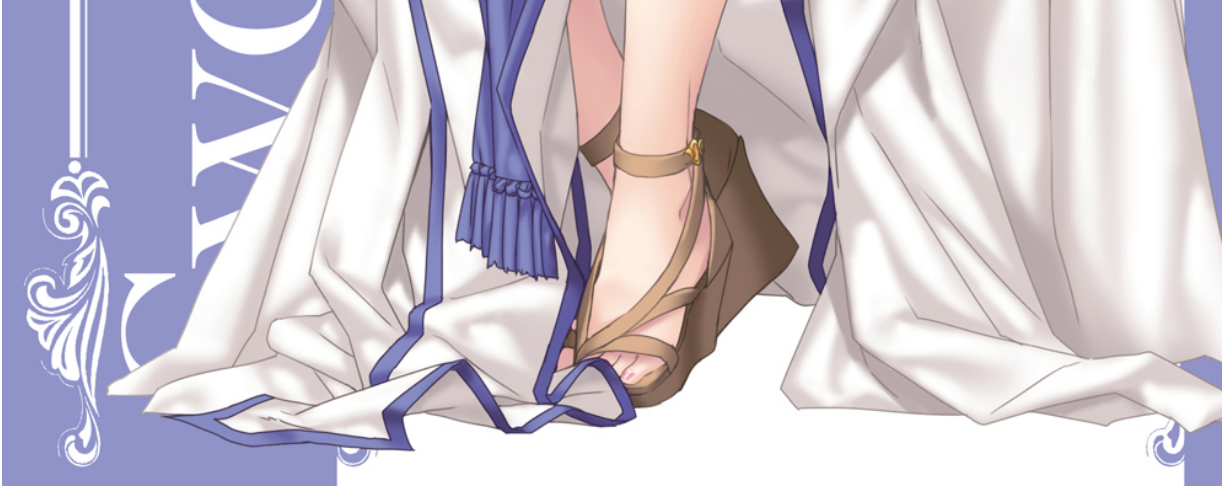




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Lord Maiden





Female Viceroy





GOBLIN SLAYER

—❖— VOLUME 10 —❖—

KUMO KAGYU

Illustration by
NOBORU KANNATUKI

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NEW YORK

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GOBLIN SLAYER

KUMO KAGYU

Translation by Kevin Steinbach ✦ Cover art by Noboru Kannatuki

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GOBLIN SLAYER

CHARACTER PROFILES

"I am to goblins what goblins are to us."



GOBLIN SLAYER

A strange adventurer active on the frontier. He is famous for reaching Silver (3rd) rank hunting only goblins.

"Protect, heal, save."



PRIESTESS

Works with Goblin Slayer. A sweet young woman who must put up with her partner's antics.

"Before they're polished, goods and precious metals all look like rocks. No dwarf would judge a thing by its appearance alone."



DWARF SHAMAN

A dwarf spell caster who adventures with Goblin Slayer.

"A naga does not run."



LIZARD PRIEST

A lizardman priest who adventures with Goblin Slayer.

"Train yourself! Kill with the blade. If blood flows, let it be the enemy's." — First of the "Secrets of Steel."



HEAVY WARRIOR

A Silver-ranked adventurer associated with the Guild in the frontier town. Along with Female Knight and his other companions, his party is one of the best on the frontier.

"Ignorance is bliss, for learning is the highest joy." — Elven proverb



HIGH ELF ARCHER

An elf girl who adventures with Goblin Slayer. A ranger and a skilled archer.

The only things that matter to her are the weather, the animals, the crops...and him.



COW GIRL

A girl who works on the farm where Goblin Slayer lives. The two are old friends.

"How can you go adventuring without fun and paper?"



GUILD GIRL

A girl who works at the Adventurers Guild. Goblin Slayer's preference for goblin slaying always helps her out.

"Only a tangled deity creates those who carelessly spin tales about love or the universe's mysteries...not to mention a woman's heart."



WITCH

A Silver-ranked adventurer at the frontier town's Adventurers Guild.

"I won't make friends tomorrow with an enemy I respect. I'll do it today."



SPEARMAN

A Silver-ranked adventurer at the frontier town's Adventurers Guild.

"Love does not consist in gazing at each other, but in looking outward in the same direction." — A poet



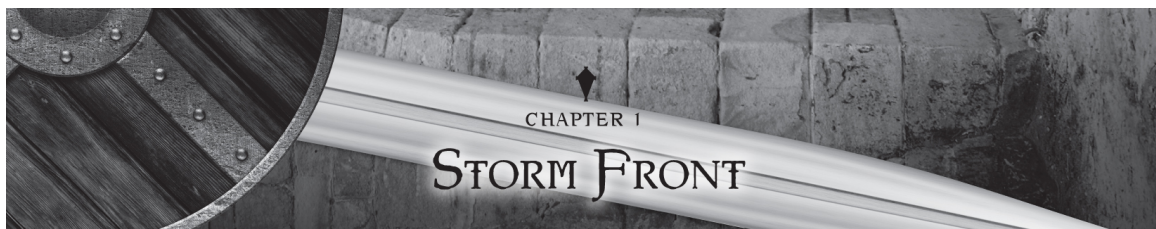
SWORD MAIDEN

Archbishop of the Supreme God in the water town. Also a Gold-ranked adventurer who once fought with the Demon Lord.

Happiness is budding grapevines,
a hillside alive with dancing blue butterflies,
and the autumn's harvest moon
a brooch upon the neck of the Earth Mother.

When the flowers bloom and bear fruit in all their glory,
with my beloved on the second starry night,
with the birdsong of the forest for dawn bells,
I feel the gentle touch of the Earth Mother.

The sweet yet bitter nectar
lights a flame in my heart
spanning the stars with the twin moons;
the joyous song of the Earth Mother is calling.



“Eek!” Priestess exclaimed, tumbling back into the bushes as bestial jaws snapped at her. “Eee-yahh...!” She lashed out with her sounding staff, and the fangs bit into it with a crack.

Filthy saliva spattered in droplets on her slight face, making her tremble in fear. The monster before her was all bloodshot eyes and a terrifying size, a true hound of hell. There was no hope for the victim of the bite of a warg.

“Ooh... H-hggh...!” Priestess summoned all her strength and kicked at the air with her pale legs, doing anything she could to keep the fangs at bay as they pressed ever closer. The warg’s limbs, each thicker than Priestess’s neck, pressed against her willowy body, the claws digging into her soft flesh. “Ahh... Ahh...?!”

Thanks to her chain mail, it didn’t hurt, at least not much. Even then, her lungs and abdomen were still being crushed, and a groan forced itself out of Priestess’s mouth. She was struggling for breath, her vision growing dim. Somewhere past the warg, she could see the dark trees of the forest. Her gaze was that of a prey animal being crushed into the earth, struggling, yes, but ultimately waiting to be eaten—a pitiful creature.

But Priestess was desperate and ready and clever to boot. She knew that she only needed an opening of an instant.

“GARW?! ”

A second later, the warg yelped as it took a kick from the side and tumbled off her.

“Are you okay?”

"Y-yes!" Priestess coughed a couple times but was able to steady her breath, and when she looked up, she saw an adventurer. He wore grimy leather armor and a cheap-looking metal helmet. In his hand was a sword of a strange length, and on his arm, a round shield. "There's another one, Goblin Slayer, sir...!"

"I know."

"GAAWRG!!"

As a second warg came rushing in, he slammed it on the nose with his shield.

"Hmph."

The monster fell over with a cry, and he jumped upon it while stabbing down, tearing out its throat.

Goblin Slayer used his shield to hold the creature down during the last of its violent death throes, then he slowly got to his feet. "...They'll have noticed us now."

"Yes...probably."

"My intuition has dulled."

Priestess didn't respond but stood up, wiping off mud and bits of shrubbery as best she could.

Before them yawned the opening of a cave that seemed as if it had appeared from thin air in the middle of the forest. At the entranceway was a strange tower built from a combination of random junk and several types of bones—most likely including human. The smell coming off the pile of abandoned refuse mingled with the stench of excrement and intercourse that emanated from the hole, completely overwhelming the aroma of the trees.

Even Priestess could tell at a glance that this was a goblin nest. "They have a shaman... And the place is guarded by wargs, not wolves. That means the nest is probably pretty large."

"Yes," Goblin Slayer said darkly. "They're waiting for us."

Needless to say, the two adventurers were on a goblin hunt.

The battle between the forces of Order and Chaos

continues endlessly. Places that once belonged to Order have fallen into a sort of no-man's-land claimed by neither side. In such places, people build villages, seeking ever more space to live, and naturally they run into monsters.

A goblin or two might be driven off by the young men of the village. Often, riding this wave of confidence, they decide to become adventurers. Two springs ago, Priestess herself had joined forces with some aspiring rookies for her very first adventure.

They had gone, of course, to slay some goblins.

When the goblins get to be too much for the local braves, when they start causing real problems, that's when the adventurers are called in.

It's been three years since then... Crouching in the bushes, Priestess looked at *his* helmet where he crouched next to her. This spring would mark the start of the third year she had spent working with this unusual adventurer who went by Goblin Slayer. She herself was seventeen now, and she had grown up a little—or so she thought, but she couldn't be sure.

I don't really feel more grown-up.

She smiled, a touch bitterly, and gripped her sounding staff. "What do we do?"

"There are supposed to be kidnapped women," he said, all cool and calm. "Let's smoke them out and reduce their numbers."

"All right, I'll get ready!" Priestess nodded and promptly dug through her bag for her Adventurer's Toolkit, producing a hammer and stakes and a coil of rope. "Never leave home without it."

She wrapped a handkerchief around her mouth to blunt the stench, then approached the cave entrance, walking as quietly as she could. She pounded the stakes into the ground and ran the rope taut between them, then slowly crawled her way back to the underbrush. While she busied herself with all this, Goblin Slayer was swinging his sword

around, chopping down tree branches and gathering them up. Then it was his turn to go over to the entrance, where he dumped the pile of branches.

"Green wood isn't ideal for a fire, but it'll smoke enough for our purposes."

Uh-huh. Priestess nodded with a smile and watched as Goblin Slayer struck a flint. Using an oily rag from their tinderbox as a starter, Goblin Slayer soon had the pile of branches puffing billows of smoke.

Of course, they were now at the mercy of wind and air patterns; if worse came to worse, the smoke might even blow back at them, making life that much harder. Blinking eyes tearing up with smoke, Priestess held up her staff in a familiar gesture. *"O Earth Mother, abounding in mercy, by the power of the land grant safety to we who are weak."*

Her supplication connected her directly to the heavens above, and an invisible power miraculously welled up. A wall of protection shielded the faithful disciple, blocking the smoke and forcing it into the opening of the cave.

All that was left was for the goblins to come fleeing out, fall into the trap, and be killed. It was such simple work—Priestess and Goblin Slayer had done something very similar at a fortress in the mountains once. Although they'd had proper fire for that operation.

"I doubt the smoke will carry all the way into the interior. We can't assume this will neutralize every last one... And there are the hostages to think of. *Whatever happens, we'll have to go inside,*" Goblin Slayer concluded in a low voice.

Priestess put a slim finger to her lips with a thoughtful "Hmm," then said anxiously, "I hope there are no other entrances..."

"In a minute or two, we'll do a quick sweep. Watch your back."

"Yes, sir, I'll keep my eyes open!"

She knew perfectly well what to do. Priestess puffed out her small chest knowingly and firmly adjusted her cap.

This time, it was just the two of them. He complained that his intuition was worse than before, but it was probably just because the others worked with them so well. Normally a single arrow from their elven archer would have felled that warg, and the party would have advanced carefully into the nest. Their dwarven shaman would have appraised the construction of the place immediately and been able to tell them if there were any back doors—or if the goblins might be digging through the walls. And if it came to a fight, their lizardman would leap in with a great howl, his arms and legs and fangs and tail tearing open a path for them.

To confront this cave with just the two of them was to realize afresh how much they relied on the others.

But... Even as she privately griped, Priestess also felt a flash of happiness in her heart. So much had happened of late that she'd had very few chances to go goblin hunting alone with him. *It's been such a long time.*

Somehow it made her happy, and she stole a glance in his direction. "Oh..." That was when she discovered an unexpectedly sweet aroma. She looked in the direction of the smell to find a cluster of wild grapes bobbing gently.

Priestess opened and closed her mouth a few times, trying to decide what to say or whether to point them out.

"What's the matter?" Goblin Slayer abruptly turned to her and asked, making Priestess's breath catch in her throat.

"C-come to think of it," she said, finally able to string a few words together, "they'll be making wine from the early grape harvest right about now." She put a hand to her chest to still her pounding heart.

"Grape wine," Goblin Slayer parroted. "You mean at the Temple of the Earth Mother?"

"Yes!" Priestess nodded as eagerly as a puppy wagging its tail. But by then, he was already looking back at the nest, and Priestess followed him, red-faced. "It's the sacred wine that they use at the harvest festival. Although, I have to

admit it's not as good as the stuff they make at the temple of the wine-making god."

"Is that so?"

"That's right," Priestess said, trying hard to affect nonchalance. But then she took another little sidelong glance at Goblin Slayer. "...Would you like to try some when it's ready?"

"I wouldn't mind," he replied shortly. "But only after we've killed the goblins."

"Here they come."

At his low-voiced warning, Priestess said, "I'm ready!" Her lips were tight, but she was smiling like an open flower.

Surely by this point, we need not describe at length what happened to the goblins.

It was a warm day, the kind that hints at the coming of summer.

§

"Oh, welcome back!"

"You're back!"

The cheerful voices of Guild Girl and Cow Girl greeted them as they pushed open the door of the Guild. It was early afternoon. There weren't many adventurers around, and the Guild was pervaded by a strange sense of apathy.

Goblin Slayer strode boldly into the middle of the space, attracting the stares of the handful of adventurers who were there—taking a day off, hungover, or like him, returning from a job. The stares only lasted a second, though.

"Yo, been a while."

"Yes."

"Goblins again?"

"That's right."

"You never get the urge to hunt something else once in a

while?"

"No."

"Don't run that poor girl ragged."

"I won't."

Casual voices greeted "the strange one."

The vast majority of adventurers only knew one another, at best, by sight, even when they worked from the same town. But that was another way of saying that even in the largest cities, you came to at least know one another's faces. And who wouldn't offer a word of greeting after spotting that distinctive cheap helmet? The man hardly ever started a conversation, but he would answer anyone who talked to him.

It wasn't a bad feeling.

Like always, Goblin Slayer diligently responded to each voice that called out to him as he made a beeline for the reception desk.

"You're here." This remark was aimed at the girl, his childhood friend, sitting by the receptionist's desk.

"Yeah, got some deliveries to make."

His voice was soft and low, but Cow Girl nodded and smiled, leaning toward him, her generous chest prominent. The cup sitting in front of her clacked, sending little ripples through the tea it held. Cow Girl chuckled and scratched her cheek in embarrassment, adding apologetically, "...And after I finished, I decided to stay for tea."

"Our little secret." *She's not slacking off.* Guild Girl put her finger to her lips, and the girls both giggled.

The months since last winter's battle had passed so quickly. Cow Girl's was the face of a girl whose village had been destroyed by goblins, yet shadows no longer clung to any part of it. Every time he saw that, Goblin Slayer would let out a relieved breath. Guild Girl was also pleased to see her friend safe and sound.

It's important to have friends you can drink tea with, Guild Girl thought.

She cleared her throat with a little cough, then glanced discreetly behind Goblin Slayer. "Good work out there. Were either of you injured?"

Priestess, pattering up behind Goblin Slayer, shook her head and replied, "No." There was always that unmistakable, wry sympathy in the voice of Guild Girl when she spoke to her. After all, at the moment, the still-young (though just turned seventeen) girl was covered from head to toe in blood. Priestess looked tired, but she mustered an admirable smile. "We managed," she said.

"Really?" This time it was Cow Girl who frowned at Priestess's gore-soaked vestments. "You can be honest, you know." She shot Goblin Slayer a suspicious look. "He won't have any idea what you mean if you don't spell it out."

"Hrk," Goblin Slayer grunted at what sounded like reproof, but he didn't say anything. Instead, he fell silent. Cow Girl, who knew this was what he did when he didn't know how to respond, bit back a laugh.

Goblin Slayer's helmet turned toward her, then he forcibly changed the subject. "I would like to make my report."

"Yes, yes. Goblin hunting, right? How was it?" Guild Girl, also chuckling, prepared her pen and paper as she sat down.

"There were goblins," Goblin Slayer stated, as though that was enough detail to describe the adventure. After a moment's thought, he added, "Also, dogs."

Priestess smiled wryly and spoke up with some hesitation. "The goblins in this nest were keeping wargs... Like I said, we managed, somehow."

"The size of the nest was relatively large, but there was nothing unusual." Then he added gruffly, "The goblins were the same as always."

Guild Girl nodded along, her pen running quietly across the page. Goblin-hunting quests tended to increase in spring, the season when new adventuring parties

registered. A few of the parties would take assignments to the sewers or elsewhere, but most of them went after goblins. Mostly they succeeded; a few didn't and came running home. And a few more never came home at all.

It was hardly a reality unique to goblin hunting. But for Guild Girl, who saw firsthand the story that the raw numbers told, it was an unpleasant time of year.

This has been a relatively easy spring, though, she thought, sighing inwardly. After all, they were starting to get new adventurers—though all too few—who had gone to the training ground for some basic instruction. The support of Female Merchant (once an adventurer herself) and the efforts of many other adventurers were bearing fruit. *Maybe more of them will start living a little longer now.*

Guild Girl knew that putting many individually minor things together could create something great. Humans were not elves, and thinking very far ahead could be difficult for them, but they knew that every road began with a single step. And road building was a human specialty, even if they didn't quite measure up to the dwarves.

Still...

It wouldn't do to forget about the present, either. It was the start of spring, when most new adventurers registered, although the peak had already passed. There was probably no one left who accepted goblin quests by choice.

Except for one person.

"...I think we may have to lean on you again this year, I'm afraid."

"I don't mind," Goblin Slayer said, so quickly he was almost interrupting her. "It's my duty."

As Goblin Slayer solemnly reaffirmed his personal mission, Priestess wore an ambiguous expression. Guild Girl studied the pair, then got to her feet without another word. She took a bag of gold out of the safe and measured it in a weighing scale. It represented the bronze coins, along with a smattering of silver, that the farmers had managed to

collect. It still weighed what it had when they had changed it over.

Goblin Slayer took the money and divided it in two, giving half to Priestess.

"Your reward."

"Th-thank you!" Priestess bowed her head hurriedly and retrieved a cute embroidered purse from her item bag. As she carefully put her coins away, Goblin Slayer nonchalantly flung his pouch of money into his bag. The helmet slowly turned toward Cow Girl.

"What are you going to do? Go home?"

"Hmm..." Cow Girl appeared to think for a moment, twiddling her fingers. Her body language implied there was much she wished she could say.

Goblin Slayer observed her steadily from within his helmet.

Ultimately, though, Cow Girl swallowed whatever she had wanted to say, breathing out a sigh instead. "No, I think I'm good." She shook her head, then offered something of a lopsided smile. "I'd like to do some more shopping. Looks like everyone's back; why don't you go say hello?"

"I see." His head turned toward the tavern. "I will."

Cow Girl nodded, then pointed an accusing finger at him. "And make sure you give that poor girl a chance to change clothes!"

"Hrk..."

The "poor girl" in question looked up from her bag with a squeak when she found she was suddenly the topic of conversation. "Oh, no, I'm just fine. Really...!"

"I disagree; I think you'll feel much finer after you put on some nice, clean clothes," Guild Girl said in a businesslike tone. Then she looked at the metal helmet with some dismay. "If you ask me, I'd like to say the same thing to our dear Goblin Slayer, here..."

"But you never know when goblins may appear." *So I cannot change.* There was nothing to do in response to the

curt declaration but sigh.

Priestess, though, took a healthy sniff of her sleeves and collar, her expression falling pitifully. "U-um, is it...? Do I smell?"

Cow Girl nodded seriously. No restraint, no mercy. "...A little."

"I was afraid of that..." Priestess, quite upset, let her head droop.

When Goblin Slayer saw that, he sighed deeply. "Go change. I'll go on ahead and wait for you."

"Yes, sir..." Priestess, still obviously distressed, got up from her seat and pattered up the stairs to her room.

Goblin Slayer watched her go, her little shoulders stooped, then stood up himself. "I'm off, then," he said, and after a moment's thought, he added, "I'll be back by dinnertime."

"Okay, sure." Cow Girl smiled at him, and then he strode off toward the tavern just as boldly as he had arrived. His companions, that strange trio, seemed to be taking their lunch at the bar. Soon the priestess would join them in her fresh clothes, and a rowdy, delightful conversation would no doubt begin.

I wonder what he talks about. Cow Girl tried to imagine a conversation she could never be a part of, then gently shook her head. Thinking about it wouldn't get her anywhere.

A few minutes passed. Guild Girl tapped the finished report against the desk, straightening the pages, then gave a little shrug. "Some things never change."

"No kidding."

The girls looked at each other, sharing a smile that said, *What can you do?*

Well, let the others have their tavern—the girls would have a conversation of their own, just the two of them.

"How about another cup of tea?"

"...Yes, please."

Goblin Slayer detailed the adventure to the others: "There were goblins." After a bit of thought, he added, "And dogs."

Priestess smiled wryly. "The goblins in this nest were keeping wargs... We managed, somehow."

"Mm, a most painful thing to have to do." Lizard Priest stuffed a great hunk of cheese into his jaws, swallowing it whole. "Had I myself been present, I could simply have wrenched open the jaws of those wargs and torn them apart for you."

"You lizardmen, such barbarians," High Elf Archer interjected insouciantly.

"I don't know what you mean," Lizard Priest replied. "There is no society in the world so civilized as our own." He licked the end of his nose with his tongue.

"I'm thinkin' you forest dwellers don't have room to criticize anyone else about being barbaric. Break a branch, lose an arm, isn't that right?"

"You are *not* as clever as you think you are," High Elf Archer shot back at Dwarf Shaman, her long ears sitting back against her head. "That law is from ages ago! They've even been talking about getting rid of it recently!"

"Your 'recently,' or ours?"

"Well, it was just... Huh?" High Elf Archer tried to count on her fingers but then cocked her head with a perplexed, "When *was* it?"

Dwarf Shaman shrugged, Lizard Priest rolled his eyes merrily in his head, and Goblin Slayer remained silent.

The party sat around a circular table, one that had practically become their private spot over the past two years. Priestess squinted her eyes at the familiar scene as if it were almost too bright to look at. When she had first conceived of becoming an adventurer, she had never imagined things would turn out like this—with many

meanings of the words *like this*.

She glanced to one side, noticing adventurers here and there wearing unblemished equipment. Parties who looked at each other, still collectively uncertain while discussing whether they should venture into the sewers or go out to gather herbs.

"How about these ruins, then? I've heard there are slimes there."

"No way we can handle that. Don't you know how dangerous creeping crud is supposed to be?"

"Oh, right... Yeah, maybe the sewers would be better..."

Priestess smiled at the snatches of conversation, just a little, so no one would notice. She recognized several from people who had also been at the training grounds. She hoped things went well for them. With a heartfelt wish, she hoped.

I guess not everything is always going to go well, but...

She whispered a private prayer for them to the merciful Earth Mother. To be a Pray-er was to keep company with Death, and she said a blessing for them as they prepared to embark on one of their first adventures.

"So, girly."

"Yes?" Priestess yelped as Dwarf Shaman interrupted her reverie. She put a hand to her hat to keep it from falling off.

The bearded dwarf poured some wine from a jug into his cup, had a gulp, and gave an appreciative burp before he said, "Just so's y'know, we're all done with our business at the Earth Mother's temple."

He ignored the elf pinching her nose and remarking "Ugh" next to him as he helped himself to another mouthful. Priestess, discovering that the cup was now empty, took the jug of wine and poured him another. "Thank you very much," she said. "I'm sorry to impose on you..."

"Oh, hardly," Dwarf Shaman replied, his spirits high and his face red. "Anything for some good wine."

"Gods, dwarf. Letting your quest giver serve you? That's twisted," High Elf Archer said, but Priestess smiled wanly and poured some of the grape wine into her own cup: "No, I don't mind... And this is really about all I can do."

"Not like we did a whole lot more. Just a few days guarding the vineyard." High Elf Archer lapped daintily at her wine, ears twitching. "I guess if a dragon showed up, that'd be one thing, but weasels and crows?"

"Yes, but I could only ask people I knew I could trust..." As she spoke, Priestess looked over at Goblin Slayer, who was depositing some wine through the slats of his helmet. "...And it would never do to leave him to his own devices."

It wasn't that Priestess had given the three of them a quest while she went off with Goblin Slayer. She had been more of an intermediary—or more plainly put, just a contact, as the quest itself had technically been issued through the Guild. She was hardly more than a representative, but that wasn't important now. There had been a request from the temple where she had grown up for people to protect the vineyards, while at the same time a goblin hunt happened to come up. That Priestess had not abandoned the goblin quest despite considerable fretting on her part was perhaps a sign of *his* influence.

"It was dangerous, but it always is." Such was the comment from the subject of their discussion, Goblin Slayer himself. "I wouldn't have minded going alone."

"I told you, I won't let you do that!" Priestess said, putting a finger in the air and adopting a chiding tone. "Going alone is impossible and foolish; that's what I think."

"Hrm."

"You said yourself that the solo quest you did recently was hard on you."

"Is that so?"

"Obviously!"

"I see."

Priestess mumbled something angry sounding but

concluded with a *He's hopeless* smile. If the group was all accustomed to arguments between High Elf Archer and Dwarf Shaman, this sort of give-and-take between the two of them was equally familiar.

"I must say, I found the process of wine-making quite interesting," Lizard Priest said with a grin, tapping a claw longingly on his empty plate. "Where I come from, we normally wait for the grapes to drop into a spring or the like and become wine of their own accord."

"We take bites out of the local fruit," High Elf Archer added with a fond nod. "And I guess we let grapes drop into springs, too and just wait until they start to ferment... Sometimes we leave honey the same way."

"Let time pass: a very elven way of wine-making."

"You dwarves have your fire wine, right?"

"Indeed we do," Dwarf Shaman said proudly, giving a hearty pound of his own belly. "Alchemists may have their distilleries, but their equipment can't hold a candle to ours."

Surely by now we hardly need mention the cleverness of dwarves when it comes to working with their hands. Just as the elves sang of their bows and the wonders of the forest, the dwarves took similar joy in mechanical precision. It was nearly as important as good food and good wine, Dwarf Shaman mused, stroking his beard with a grin. "Wouldn't mind a taste of the new vintage for myself when it's ready."

"Yes, of course. If you can stomach what we make." Priestess's cheeks flushed as she spoke. High Elf Archer asked what was so embarrassing, but Priestess only gave a noncommittal reply.

Hmm. Goblin Slayer's helmet cocked to one side, and he said softly, "So you do this every year."

"You need to pay more attention to what goes on around you, Orcbolg," High Elf Archer said with an exasperated sigh, turning neatly toward him. "So *do* you do this every year?"

"Listen, you...", Dwarf Shaman said with a glare, but High Elf Archer flicked her long ears.

"C'mon, last year we were at my home around this time, and the year before that, we were at the water town, right?"

That was perfectly accurate. Summer had meant traveling for them the past two years; they'd never spent the season in the frontier town. It would not be so surprising if not all of them knew about the early grape harvest and the wine that was made from it.

The only real point of contention was that this adventurer in the cheap-looking metal helmet had already lived in this town for seven years.

"It isn't that I don't pay attention," he said by way of an excuse. "I've been busy."

"Busy hunting goblins...", Priestess said, fixing him with a stare. "Right?"

"Yes."

"I could have guessed!" She slumped in her chair, looking sulky, although she didn't feel it. She pointedly looked away from him, but then glanced back out the side of her eye, sticking out her lip. "The wine that makes the rounds at the harvest festival—we make that, too, you know?"

"I didn't realize."

"I have to admit, it can't compete with the stuff that comes out of the temple of the god of wine-making..." Priestess still had a tendency to blush when she remembered the offering dance, a prayer for abundance, in which she had participated the year before last. The outfit she'd worn had been so skimpy, although she seemed to remember getting some nice compliments on it...

"...Anyway!" she said, shaking her head. "Just don't forget your promise."

"I won't."

This response from Goblin Slayer seemed to satisfy

Priestess, who smilingly picked up a cup. They were celebrating the completion of their respective adventures. Yes, it was only just past noon, but there was no reason everyone shouldn't relax a little. It was wonderful to enjoy the familiar local cooking, drink some wine, and talk with your companions.

"Ahem, waitress!" Lizard Priest signaled by slamming his tail on the floor once everyone was well settled in.

"Coming!" The padfoot server came pattering over, and Lizard Priest grunted with a sober nod.

"I request another plate of cheese. Another of the—what was it again? The stuffed ones."

"Ah, the cream-filled cheese." The waitress flicked her ears and giggled. "Coming right up—and I'll bring a little extra, my treat!"

"Hoh-hoh, most appreciated!" Lizard Priest howled, making a strange palms-together gesture.

"Don't sweat it," Padfoot Waitress said with a dismissive wave of her hand.

"And you, milord Goblin Slayer," Lizard Priest said rather lightly as he watched the girl go. "There were several small sets of footprints just beyond the vineyard. What do you make of them?"

"Goblins," he answered immediately. "Did you see them yourself?"

"Indeed," Lizard Priest said with a stretch of his sinuous neck. "I thought they might be the work of some mischievous children, but I cannot say with certainty."

"I see," Goblin Slayer grunted, then poured not wine but water into his cup and took a drink. "Did you tell anyone else?"

"Someone from the temple and Master Spell Caster." Lizard Priest looked over at where High Elf Archer and Priestess were having a conversation, as friendly as two flowers blooming. It was always hard for them to say whether High Elf Archer "looked her age," but Priestess

had an expression befitting a sixteen-or seventeen-year-old girl. The Temple of the Earth Mother had, as they understood it, taken her in as an orphan and raised her. "And if it turns out to be a false alarm, I wouldn't want to worry her."

"Understood." Goblin Slayer nodded without hesitation. "I will take a look."

Lizard Priest nodded, too. He pursued the conversation no further.

"Here you go—thank you for waiting!" Padfoot Waitress chirped as she dumped a pile of cheese in front of him. It was practically bursting from the cream that had been stuffed into it.

Lizard Priest swallowed one in a single gulp and proclaimed, "Ah, sweet nectar!"

§

The next day, it poured rain from dawn to dusk. The downpour mercilessly pounded on the roof and windows from the leaden sky, the drain spouts chattering with runoff.

"Are you really going out? Can't you see the weather?" Cow Girl, leaning on the windowsill and looking out, glanced back over her shoulder. The canary in the cage hanging beside her gave a twitter of agreement.

"Yes," he responded briefly, conducting a quick check of his equipment. Helmet and gloves in good shape. Fasteners on his belt secure. Every day for him began with a patrol of the farm, and he had already been out in the rain doing that, so he was soaked from head to toe. It would take quite a bit of time and trouble to dry everything, oil it, and put it back on again.

Of course, his equipment was all cheap. He didn't know how much of a difference expensive gear would make, assuming he wore everything correctly. All he knew was

that this cheap equipment had saved his life countless times. He needed to take care of it.

Cow Girl had heard him say this, and so she didn't think of interrupting as she watched the work going on in front of her.

But gear or no gear—this weather.

"You could do it tomorrow, couldn't you? Or just wait awhile; maybe it'll stop."

"No."

"Hmph," Cow Girl grumbled, frustrated to find her attempt at to persuade him rebuffed.

He is so stubborn.

When she had asked if this was for a job, he had said it wasn't. When she had asked if it absolutely had to be today, he had said it was urgent. She had considered a number of things she might say to convince him to stay, but in the end, she kept them to herself, only sighing instead. It was no easy task to make him change his mind.

I know that much by now.

"Okay, well, wait a few minutes, then. I'll pack you a lunch or something."

"...Hrm."

He grunted at the abrupt change, and his hand stopped its work. Cow Girl pushed away from the window and peeked up into his helmet.

"Or can you not even wait that long?"

"...I can." He took a thoughtful breath, then the helmet nodded slowly. "Please do."

"Right. One lunch, coming up." Her voice came out a little more emphatic than she had meant. She tried to cover for herself by promptly turning for the kitchen.

But still...

She expected she didn't have much time to waste. Cow Girl grabbed an apron hanging nearby, tying it behind her even as she deliberated over what to cook.

"Just a sandwich, I guess." Not *cooking* in the classic

sense, but just right when one was in a hurry.

She didn't know when people had begun using baked bread in place of plates, but putting a couple of pieces of it together and eating them was a tradition that seemed to stretch back a long, long way. And it was raining today. It would be impossible to get bread from the Bakers Guild in town. They kept bread in the cupboard for just this sort of occasion.

"Though it's nothing like the fresh-baked stuff."

She poked at the loaf, burned to a hard, black crisp, then took it, cut off some slices, and loaded them with butter. A couple of nice, thin slices of cheese, and there you had it.

Wish I could add an egg or something...

But again, unfortunately, the rain. And the hens probably hadn't laid any yet. You couldn't just get baskets of eggs every day. The hens had been raised so carefully that she wanted him to taste the eggs, but there was no time to fry one up anyway...

Okay, this calls for a substitution!

Cow Girl shifted gears quickly, piling two or three slices of salt-cured ham on top of the cheese.

"Aaaand let's see..."

The sandwich still looked a little sad. She rifled through the storage cabinets, grabbing a pinch of dried herbs, taking out a bottle of pickles. There was a risk of a confusion of colors and flavors, but they did say variety was the spice of life.

"♪..."

Cow Girl whistled a little tune. It was simple, but food was food. Fun to make—whistling-ly fun. She cut up the pickled vegetables expertly, shredded the herbs, and let her intuition tell her how much to put on top of the meat.

Finally, there came another slice of buttered bread, and it was done.

Cow Girl gave a satisfied grunt, then divided the sandwiches she had made into three and wrapped them in

cloth. Then she added a bottle of grape wine diluted with water and—

“All done!”

“Hey.”

“Eek?!”

She jumped at the unexpected voice, pressing her hand to her chest as she turned around. He must have come in through the back door. Her uncle, his rain gear dripping and his eyes wide.

“U-Uncle! Gosh, you scared me...” Still with a hand to her generous chest, Cow Girl said, “How was it? Think the rain’s going to stop?”

“Probably not today,” her uncle replied, looking cross. “We can’t put the cows out. I just hope the wind doesn’t get too much stronger.”

“Huh, okay...” Cow Girl furrowed her eyebrows, too, taking a quick look outside through the window. Her uncle was right; the rain only seemed to be getting stronger. The sky was dark, and she could hear the voices of the Thunder Drakes rumbling above. There was a saying, though, that summer usually came after a storm.

“Well, so it goes,” she said. The weather was one thing that wouldn’t change no matter how much you worried about it. It depended on the gods’ dice. Cow Girl picked up a cloth-wrapped package and held it out to her uncle: “Here, lunch.”

“Oh, ‘preciate it.” He took the bundle carefully and secured it behind his waist, under his raincoat. Then he glanced at the other two lunches sitting in the kitchen and frowned. “...He’s going out, too, is he?”

“Oh, yeah,” Cow Girl said with a nod. “But I guess it’s not an adventure.”

“Certainly keeps himself busy...” Cow Girl caught the barb in her uncle’s words and looked at the ground. Her uncle regarded her silently for a moment, then gave in with a sigh. “...We should still have that old raincoat of mine.”

Cow Girl looked up, confused, but her uncle, still looking less than thrilled, continued brusquely: "Let him borrow it."

"Are you sure?"

"He's more or less selling his own body, isn't he?" her uncle said, sounding tired. "Wouldn't be good for business if he caught a cold."

"Sure, right...!" Cow Girl nodded broadly, her face lighting up. "Thank you, Uncle!"

She rushed out of the kitchen, waved to *him* where he waited patiently in the dining room, and headed for her uncle's bedroom. There was an old leather raincoat hanging from a nail on the wall. It had some patches, but it could still be counted on to keep the rain off.

Cow Girl grabbed it, but when she got back to the kitchen, her uncle was no longer there—perhaps he had disappeared out of a certain embarrassment. *He* was the only one inside, sitting in a chair. Cow Girl bit her lip, but then she handed him the coat along with the lunches.

"Here, for you!"

He looked confused—although she couldn't see his face—but, after a moment's silence, said simply, "What's this?"

"Uncle said he would lend it to you." *Be sure to thank him later.*

"Mm," he responded. "I have a raincoat of my own..." he added softly, but in the end, he nodded obligingly. "Very well."

Uncle was physically a bit smaller than him. The more so when he had been younger. But the hooded rain jacket was on the large side, seemingly with room to spare for the adventurer. It was old, the leather dry and starting to crack in places, but it was serviceable. In fact, it seemed a better idea than an ill-advised brand-new raincoat.

"Wow, it fits you perfectly." Cow Girl clapped her hands together. She had been a little worried about the fit with his helmet.

She watched him carefully secure the lunches to his belt,

next to his item pouch, and then she smiled at him. "All right, be careful. It's awful wet out there, so make sure you don't slip."

"Yes," he replied with a nod. He took a few exploratory steps, then strode to the door. With his hand on the knob, he turned to look at her. "I'll be back by night."

Okay. Cow Girl nodded, still smiling. "I'll be waiting."

The door opened, then he disappeared into the raindrops, and the door closed.

"Right," Cow Girl said with a little nod and set back about her routine.

§

Pulling the increasingly soaked raincoat around her shoulders, Priestess looked up disconsolately at the sky. The rain had been coming down all day, fast and hard, big drops that struck her without mercy. Droplets streamed from her cap; the raincoat had long ago reached its limit and soaked through, and now the water was working its way into her clothes.

Summer was supposed to be close, but this rain sapped the heat from her body until she was freezing cold and her breath came in white puffs from her mouth. For a while, she tried in vain to stay near enough to the town walls to protect herself under the eaves.

A shadowy human figure could be seen behind the veil of the rain. When she noticed it, Priestess's face broke into a smile like the sun emerging from behind the clouds.

"Goblin Slayer, sir, good morning!"

"Yes," he said. He was clothed in a heavy raincoat of his own. "Sorry—I'm late."

"Not at all, I was just here a little early..."

"Is that so?"

Yes. Priestess responded with a nod, her good cheer

coming back to her. She set off at a walk, leading the way.

And well she might be happy. This person who only ever spoke of goblins, goblins, and more goblins had shown an interest in the vineyard. The very vineyard at the Temple of the Earth Mother, her own home! How could her heart not leap for joy? She reveled in every step as she went along, even the ones that landed in puddles.

As they walked the road to the temple, Priestess turned around to look up at his metal helmet. "I—I can't help wondering, why the sudden interest in the vineyard?" She was frustrated to find she couldn't keep her voice from squeaking a bit, but she endeavored to sound more or less normal. But then she clapped her hands together. "Oh! Maybe this has to do with your promise to try our wine?"

"No," Goblin Slayer replied, then after some thought, he grunted softly. "...Well, yes."

"That's wonderful... Hee-hee!" She added another happy "I see, I see" to herself as they trotted along. There were flagstones in town, but one step outside the gates, and it was a dirt path. Which was to say, now a mud path, dark goop that clung to their shoes and jumped up to land on their clothes.

Priestess found herself oddly captivated by the sprays of dark mud on her white boots and cast her eyes to the ground in embarrassment at the unseemly thought. She moved her toes uncomfortably, feeling the water that had invaded her boots squelch between them.

I'll have to wash and dry them later...

She didn't begrudge the time to do the washing; in fact, she enjoyed the work. But she worried that she looked altogether too pathetic just then, and the thought made her blush. Yes, she was cold, but the heat in her face was still unwelcome...

"...You want to come in?"

"Huh?"

When she grasped the meaning of the ambush of a

question, her face got even hotter.

Goblin Slayer's raincoat was obviously old, but it was rather large. Priestess was small enough that it could easily cover them both. It wouldn't go over her head, sure enough, but at least around her shoulders...

"Oh, n-no. Th-thank you for the offer, but I'll pass. Um..." She then pictured herself under the same raincoat as him and promptly gave a vigorous wave of her hand. She accompanied it with a shake of her head, sending water flying from her heavy, sodden golden hair. "I'm already completely soaked!"

"I see." Goblin Slayer nodded before falling silent again. This was his normal attitude; it didn't mean anything, and Priestess looked at the ground with nothing to say back. She was overthinking things, nothing more. But—how could she put this?

...To go back to the temple like that with him...

It would be shameful. That was the word for it.

For Priestess, who didn't know what her mother looked like—or indeed any of her blood family—the temple was home. The clerics who served there were her mother, her older sisters, her younger sisters. For her to show up sharing a raincoat with a man, even a man from her party...

And that's just the way it is. Nothing more to say about it!

She had already worried them when she went off to become an adventurer. She didn't want to give them any strange ideas to boot.

Inside her modest chest, her heart was pounding like a bell being rung too fast, and she privately regretted having to excuse herself. But she hurried on ahead.

It wasn't that far from the town to the temple. They proceeded through the rain, practically swimming, and before long the shape of the building—though nowhere near as big as the temple of the God of Law—loomed up out of the murk.

And then they were standing in front of it, and three familiar figures emerged.

"Sorry we're late..."

"Oh, you made it! What took you so long, Orcbolg?" Despite the fact that her hooded raincoat was soaked through, High Elf Archer jumped up and down, as pleased as a little child. Each time she jumped and waved, water went flying from her hands and hair, but she didn't mind a bit. She grinned just like she was playing in the water and appeared to be dancing through the rain.

"Watch out, Anvil. Be careful y'don't rust."

"Rain is a gift from the heavens. But you dwarves wouldn't know that, seeing as you spend all your time underground."

"Gods..." Dwarf Shaman, holding a reddish oil-paper umbrella, heaved a sigh. He held his precious bag of catalysts in front of him, taking evident care that it not get soaked by the rain.

Priestess took a close look at his umbrella, letting out an impressed breath. "Umbrellas really are something..."

"Mm, they're a use of one precious hand on an adventure, is what they are. I seem to recall they're something of a commodity around here."

"Yes, we consider them a bit of a luxury."

Huh. When she heard that, High Elf Archer said, "Those have been around since I was a girl—they haven't changed much."

"And what do elves use for umbrellas, leaves? A different class of rain protection altogether."

"I heard that!" And then the elf and the dwarf were off and arguing.

Lizard Priest stood silently beside them, squinting his eyes against the rain.

Goblin Slayer noticed. "It's raining," he said simply.

"Mm. Bad timing, this," Lizard Priest replied softly. "Not good for tracking. The footprints will have disappeared."

"But the horde is unlikely to come," Goblin Slayer said. "At least not today." They kept their voices low enough that they were covered by the rain, and Priestess didn't hear them. High Elf Archer might have, had she been listening, but her ears were flat back against her head as she jabbered with Dwarf Shaman.

Perhaps even that little tiff was a kindness perpetrated by the dwarf, but Priestess knew nothing of that. She knew nothing of any of the consideration being taken by the three men. She heard only what came next.

"You want to use it?" Goblin Slayer asked, indicating the raincoat wrapped around him. The two of them would never fit, of course, but it was large enough that it could cover Lizard Priest by himself.

The lizardman, still bracing himself against the chill of the raindrops, spun his eyes in his head. "Ha-ha-ha-ha, rain we had plenty of in my home, but never so cold." *However.* He made his strange palms-together gesture, stopping Goblin Slayer before he could remove his coat. "That coat was given to you. Let you yourself be the one to use it, milord Goblin Slayer."

"I see."

"Ooh, show me!" demanded High Elf Archer, who had picked up the conversation with her sharp hearing. She grabbed the collar of the raincoat. "Huh. What's this? Is it new? New to you, I mean."

"Yes," Goblin Slayer replied, nodding. "It's old but good quality."

"Hoh? How's that? Let me have a look. Elves don't know fit from a fiddle," Dwarf Shaman mumbled, provoking a snort from High Elf Archer. He traced the stitching of the raincoat with his short, stubby fingers, and before long, he let out another murmur. "Hoh. Sturdy stuff. Not flashy, just reliable. I like it."

"Yes," Goblin Slayer said, returning a nod. "I thought so as well."

“...” Priestess stood apart, watching them. She didn’t know why, but she wanted to sigh. Perhaps it was because the pounding of her heart had given way to something hazier, less certain.

In any event, she couldn’t shake the feeling that he looked like a child showing off his brand-new rain gear.

§

“Oh, you’re finally here! Come on, don’t just stand there; come help out!” The voice of a woman who sounded as bright as the sun reached them.

“Ah, right! Don’t worry, ma’am. I’m coming...!” Priestess looked up and saw someone splashing through the rain. Her garments were dirty, proof that she had been hard at work, and she was wearing a thick raincoat of her own. As Priestess had said, it was possible to tell other servants of the Earth Mother by their vestments, but...

“Hmm...”

...there was no blaming Goblin Slayer for his low murmur.

This woman had skin as dark as a well-sunned grape, and luxurious black hair flowed from under her cap. Add to that her eyes, green as a pair of emeralds, and it was clear this woman was not from around here. She was human, yes, but humans came in many types. She was most likely one of those people who had wandered up past the southern mountains...

“Huh, so you’re our little girl’s party leader.” She was still young—just a year or two older than Priestess, perhaps—but the nun smiled broadly, her large chest prominent. “Well, chitchat comes later! We have to bring these grapes in before they’re ruined by the rain!” The woman sounded somewhat like Priestess, albeit not as demure. She ran sprightly through the rain, most likely heading straight for

the vineyard. Goblin Slayer made to follow her, then glanced back at Priestess.

"She's one of my seniors," Priestess said softly and then smiled. "She's an incredible person."

"I met her yesterday, and boy was I surprised," High Elf Archer said with a laugh like a bell. "Can't believe you turned out so quiet when you were raised by someone so loud."

"Well, sisters don't always resemble each other," Dwarf Shaman teased, thinking of a certain older sister who had recently gotten married.

"Hmph," High Elf Archer replied but said nothing more; she was probably thinking of the same thing.

"I see," Goblin Slayer said, but then he went silent again. His helmet was pointed down at his feet, surveying the bushes just beyond the rain.

He and Lizard Priest nodded at each other, then ran along, taking care to keep an eye on their surroundings. But it was unlikely that goblins would threaten this place now.

"...The rain's really gotten heavier, hasn't it?" High Elf Archer sniffed, her sensitive ears twitching. That sensitivity was crucial to her party. She might have missed the conversation earlier, but she would never fail to notice the approach of Non-Prayers.

"Indeed," Lizard Priest replied quietly, looking at the sky. "A cold and most foreboding rain."

Before long, the party arrived at a patch of low foliage. Sister Grape, the nun from earlier, had a leather umbrella in hand and was looking quite agitated. The other clerics—in fact, the group included younger acolytes as well, still learning—were all hard at work.

Priestess pressed her waterlogged hat to her head and called out, "Ma'am, what do you want us to—?"

"It's raining like the dickens this year! Change out the umbrellas over the grapes!" Sister Grape called out. "Rain

means mold, mold means no harvest, and no harvest means no wine!"

"Hoh!" Dwarf Shaman exclaimed, closing his own umbrella. "A grave matter. Better do what we can." He trotted off into the field.

High Elf Archer followed him at a nimble gait. "I thought we were here to keep guarding the place. I don't care what happens to the wine..." She shrugged. "Then again, the grass and trees are sort of my friends. Where are the fresh umbrellas?"

"Right in that basket!"

"I'll help, too!" Priestess said, and as if that were their cue, the entire party leaped into action.

If grapes grew on tall trees, that would be one thing, but the vines only came up to the height of a human chest. Dwarves had deft hands, and the work was easy for the shaman; for the elf, we need hardly say, it was even easier.

"...Hmm. I suppose I will fumble through, somehow." For a lizardman, on the other hand, it was rather harder: Lizard Priest's movements were slowed by the cold, and it was all too easy for him to damage the fruit with his long claws. After struggling with the task for some time, Lizard Priest apparently decided he could best serve the cause by carrying the basket of leather umbrellas.

Priestess flitted back and forth, doing work she had helped with since she was a little girl... And then her eyes went wide. "You already know how to do this...?"

"I never dealt with grapes specifically," Goblin Slayer said. "But I have helped out around the farm."

Take care that the grape bunches don't get wet, that the fruit doesn't overlap. He moved a sopping umbrella and replaced it with a new one. The wind gusted; it felt like a storm was coming.

"So strange," Sister Grape said, breathing audibly as she came up to them. "We almost never have rain like this at this time of year." She looked at the sky, troubled. Storms

usually came a bit later in the season. Summer had only just started, and this weather was unusual.

"Couldn't you, like, use a miracle?" High Elf Archer said as she brushed away some hair clinging to her cheek. "Put up Protection like you always do, and boom, all dry!"

"If we lean on the gods to do everything for us, what's the point of doing anything ourselves?" Sister Grape said, flashing a smile full of white teeth. She didn't bother to brush away her hair. "We turn to the gods when we're really in need. Right now, I think we can still make something of this on our own!"

"Let the wind and the storms come!" she declared confidently, and then she dove among the vines.

"I see," Lizard Priest said, repelling the raindrops with his scales. "She is indeed a most memorable person."

"Well then, what about spells?" Dwarf Shaman grinned and patted his bag as he held up his dripping beard proudly. "It's not quite asking the help of the gods."

"A spell caster," Sister Grape said, her eyes going wide. "I suppose the Earth Mother would allow that!"

Priestess giggled to herself. Sister Grape was just as she remembered, warmhearted even in the midst of this torrential downpour. Every year, she had been the most excited about picking the grapes and making the wine.

It had been two years now since Priestess had left the Temple of the Earth Mother. She had returned periodically to help with this and that, but...

It really hasn't changed.

Such were her feelings. Some familiar faces were there, others had left, and some new people had joined. But when it came to the place she could go home to, this was it.

As Priestess worked industriously, sweat and raindrops running down her forehead, Dwarf Shaman started to weave a spell beside her. *"O sylphs, thou windy maidens fair, grant to me your kiss most rare—bless our wine with breezes fair!"*

A whirlwind began to form in the air, dancing around the vineyard. The quick-stepping wind sprites repelled the raindrops, and the clerics found themselves stopping to watch in spite of themselves.

“Wow.” High Elf Archer whistled. “Pretty good trick for a dwarf.”

“I myself could not possibly manage the ways of wind like this,” Lizard Priest added, his large eyes rolling as he stared at the sky.

This production of otherworldly beings was on a completely different league from pedestrian art. Goblin Slayer alone among all of them glanced up at the sky for only a second before he silently resumed his work.

It was not that he was unaffected by the display. Adventure, the mystery of the world, had a natural attraction. But...

“Goblins...?”

When he spotted shadows hiding beyond the rain, lurking in the trees, that was another story.

No, not the right size for goblins.

He felt for his sword under his raincoat even as he came to this conclusion. They were too tall to be goblins but too short to be hobs. Humans, he suspected. Possibly people from the temple, but the figures vanished into the mist before he could be sure.

Should I pursue them?

He thought about it, then shook his head. They were not goblins. And there was the rain to consider. And they were short-handed in the vineyard.

All of this added up to what he said as droplets dripped from his visor: “What should I do next?”

§

“Ahhh, that was a big help. Thanks so much!” Sister Grape’s

eager voice resounded in the temple dining hall, giving it a bit of extra warmth. The place was hardly cramped, but it was nothing like the temple of the God of Law in the water town, let alone the royal castle she had once seen.

That was not to say, of course, that the other two places were examples of wasteful opulence. Authority had to maintain a certain decorum. Some might balk, for example, at abiding by legal decisions handed down by priests in shabby vestments. And no one would be in awe of a king dressed in rags and carrying a wooden sword.

But for the Temple of the Earth Mother, things were different. The dining hall was simply a collection of long tables accompanied by benches, and the food was nothing elaborate. But it had an unmistakable warmth. What other ornament was needed to communicate a mother's love?

"The teachings of other faiths are greatly interesting. Sometimes there are indeed points of intersection with my own beliefs." Lizard Priest took a restrained (but still large) slice of the hunk of cheese on the plate in front of him. "Although the fearsome nagas, whom we serve, say that in battle one is to raise one's crest."

"Well, gracious," Sister Grape said with a chuckle. "Us women sure know how to do that when we need to!"

Her words carried some meaning that seemed to reach the other adepts, because they all giggled along with her. Only Priestess blushed and looked at the ground, her mouth working. She had been the one who had served as the officiant at the harvest festival the year before last—but that wasn't the only thing on her mind.

There was also the peculiar man sitting on the far end of the bench and attracting little glances from the adepts. He wore grimy leather armor and a cheap-looking metal helmet. On his arm was a round shield, and at his hip a sword of a strange length. He had been dripping water from head to toe not long before, but someone had industriously dried him with a towel—namely, Priestess.

Aha, so this is the infamous he.

"He doesn't look like much." "It is impossible to see his face." "He's well-built." "How tall is he, really?" "His voice seems so soft."

"His movements were so nimble in the fields." "What rank is he?" "Silver, apparently." "Why, that's the third level. Amazing."

"Is he a warrior?" "Kind of looks like he could be a scout." "How about you try talking to him?"

The girls, older and younger alike, whispered noisily, adding to Priestess's embarrassment. "Ughhh..." If this was how things were to be, would she have been better off not talking to them every time she came back to the temple? Or was this embarrassment at having it known that she had done such an outrageous thing...?

"Eh, I daresay this is how it goes when y'bring friends home." *Got a fair few relatives myself.* Dwarf Shaman grinned encouragingly at Priestess. He was busily spreading butter on some black bread, chomping through it with no regard for how tough it was. He plucked some crumbs from his beard and tossed them into his mouth as Priestess looked at him pitifully.

"I... I know what you're saying, but... Really, I just can't..."

Seated as they were, the two of them were eye to eye. Dwarf Shaman could tell at a glance exactly how red Priestess's pale skin had gotten.

"Just roll with it. Look at me—I'm surviving despite the conspicuous lack of meat or fish." He chuckled at what he saw, draining his cup of grape wine. "Hoh!" he exclaimed, his eyes widening. "Won't say it's on the level of the great Wine God, but you can tell it's a blessing from the Earth Mother."

"And I'm very honored to hear you say that," Sister Grape said with a catlike grin, resting her chin in her hands and looking off to one side. "It looks like our little sister is

already well and truly drunk."

"So she is!" Dwarf Shaman exclaimed, laughing uproariously. Priestess tried to make herself even smaller.

"Ahhh, that warms you right up," High Elf Archer said, narrowing her eyes like a cat that's come in soaked from the rain. "Hey, Orcbolg." She reached out with her elbow and jabbed at Goblin Slayer, who was silently eating alternating mouthfuls of bread and soup.

"What?" He stopped with a piece of black bread still dipped in his soup, the helmet turning toward High Elf Archer.

"Don't *what* me," she said, her lips pursing in annoyance. "Don't you have anything to contribute to this conversation?"

"Anything," Goblin Slayer repeated in a low voice. "Like what?"

In a sudden panic, Priestess said, "No, it's all right...!" But her voice had all the force of a buzzing mosquito.

High Elf Archer's elf ears naturally picked up on it, but she declared, "Can't hear you." Then she turned to Goblin Slayer. "I mean about the girl, or, you know, like, anything!"

"Hmm... Very well," he said, but Sister Grape reached out a hand to him.

"Before you say anything, please, let me thank you."

"Thank me?"

"Yes, of course," Sister Grape said, delicately wiping the smile from her face and giving a deep bow of her head. "You've done so much for our little sister. Thank you—I mean it."

Priestess looked back and forth between them with mounting dismay.

"No," Goblin Slayer said with a shake of his head. "She's the one who helps me."

Priestess could hardly utter a sound at that and just stared vacantly at his helmet.

"I owe her my thanks."

Unable to bear this, Priestess looked down again. Her hands clutched the sleeves of her vestments. This didn't go unnoticed by High Elf Archer, who giggled. She glanced at Lizard Priest, who rolled his eyes merrily in his head. "I pride myself on my martial abilities. Nuances, I'm afraid, are lost on me."



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“Unlike a certain anvil, at least you know how to be considerate.”

High Elf Archer’s long ears went back, and she exclaimed, “What was that?!” But even this demand soon turned to laughter. The adepts, listening in, heard the elf’s laugh ring like a bell, echoing around the dining hall. There was such warmth in her voice that it seemed like it would bring a tear to the eye; the atmosphere felt so *good* that it brought to mind the comfort of the Earth Mother.

Sister Grape smiled and nodded at Priestess, who was studiously looking at the ground, not saying anything. “Well, isn’t this lovely? And here old Mother Superior was worried about you.” Mother Superior was hardly “old.” Priestess looked up, though, when she detected the love behind the little jab. “But you have such good friends. It puts the heart at ease—mine as much as hers.”

Priestess felt like she would choke on the words in her throat, but she at last managed to come up with “Yes, ma’am.”

When Sister Grape saw that, she finally got a look of approval on her face, then said lightly to *him*: “By the way, mister...Goblin Slayer, was it?”

“That’s what I am called.” Over in the corner of this warm room, the adventurer, who had quietly resumed eating, stopped once more.

“There’s a pioneer village nearby where I’ve heard there’s been some goblins. Maybe you could give us your advice?”

His answer was immediate. “I’ll go,” he grunted. “Tell me the location. How large is the nest?”

“Yikes, you sure make up your mind in a hurry. Just as advertised...” Sister Grape looked at Priestess with a touch of surprise. Her mouth formed the words, “You’ve got it rough, huh?” Priestess shook her head in response. Then she wiped her eyes with her sleeves so *he* wouldn’t see her smile.

He is well and truly hopeless.

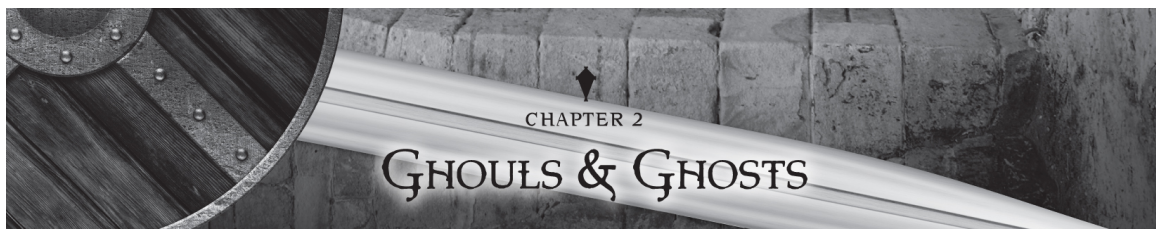
So the day passed.

Their next job would be exterminating the goblins Sister Grape had mentioned.

"Again?!" High Elf Archer burst out on being informed of this, but she wasn't as unhappy as she sounded. Lizard Priest and Dwarf Shaman both looked grim and quickly began conferring with Goblin Slayer about what was to be done. For Priestess, though, even that was a happy, familiar sight, and she found herself blinking quickly. The fatigue she felt after working through the storm, the warmth of her belly full of food, the voices of everyone around her: All were comforting and good. She let out a little yawn as she felt the sandman pass by, and soon she dropped off to sleep.

It had been a peaceful day of easy happiness. A wonderful day of the sort for which she was grateful to the Earth Mother.

It was shortly thereafter that the rumors began to spread that Sister Grape was the daughter of a goblin.



“Urrrgh...” Priestess kicked the ground angrily as she walked. For her, it was extremely unusual. She was always an even-keeled girl, and although it was old, this was a cemetery; and she had never been the type to disturb the rest of the dead.

Perhaps *cemetery* wasn’t as accurate a term as *funeral mound*. Deep in a forest darkened by numerous trees, there was a place where the ground rose in a gentle slope. Nearby was a pile of rocks, covered in moss but obviously not natural. It was clearly the grave of some powerful king or noble, once famous in times past.

That being the case, it was a place that a devout disciple of the Earth Mother such as herself should have shown the proper respect.

“Urrrrrrgh...”

And yet there was Priestess, gritting her teeth like a sullen child, barely able to conceal her unhappiness. High Elf Archer, going ahead of her, twitched her ears and whispered without looking back, “Very unusual.”

“A sign of how difficult this is for her to accept,” Lizard Priest said with a nod. “One can hardly blame her.”

Dwarf Shaman just looked up helplessly at the sky. He was surely not expecting anything from the gods in heaven. *She’s like a right child, she is.*

The girl was seventeen years old. Two years into her majority, and certainly more grown-up than she used to be, but she was still young. Besides, by age alone, the anvil up ahead was the oldest of them by far.

Adulthood was more than just the accumulation of years.

She was still a young girl. Always diligently thoughtful, always worrying about everyone else, always trying to make herself useful—and that was precisely what made her seem such a child. It would all be very heartening to see, if one didn't know the cause of it.

"Hey, Beard-cutter. Say something to the girl, why don't you?"

"Hrm...", Goblin Slayer, scouting from his position second in line, grunted softly. "Such as?"

"Surely you don't need me to tell you."

Goblin Slayer didn't answer. There was no answer to give.

His focus was on the ground in front of him, on the adventure ahead, and he had no attention to spare for other matters.

As quests go, it is somewhat unusual.

For one thing, no actual harm had been done yet, an all too rare feature of goblin hunts. The claim was that goblins had been spotted in the forest near the village that was used for hunting and gathering. They were little shadows that squirmed through the white mist. Shifting forms that a hunter identified as goblins.

This hunter had been part of the battle the year before, as an archer. He would never mistake a goblin. He had debated with himself whether he should act first. When he considered that antagonizing one or two of the creatures could bring a whole horde down on his village, he thought better of it.

It was quite understandable, too, that the hunter would take his concerns to the Temple of the Earth Mother before he thought of going to the Adventurers Guild. And it was through the nun he spoke to that the story reached Goblin Slayer...

"I'll do it." That was what he had ultimately said.

"Eh, seems nothing has actually happened yet," Sister Grape had admitted with an embarrassed smile. *"It just*

worries a person, having goblins skulking around."

"I agree," Goblin Slayer had replied. *"I agree completely."*

The problems started after that.

It wasn't clear who had said it first, or why. But whispers began in town, at the taverns, even in the dark corners of the Guild.

"Think that nun is a goblin's spawn?" they asked.

It was, of course, difficult to openly criticize the Temple of the Earth Mother. This was a world where gods performed very real miracles for people. They existed. That was a fact accepted by all.

But attacking an individual was an entirely separate matter. Citizen or adventurer, not everyone was pure and upright.

She was the daughter of a woman who had been impregnated by a goblin, they said. They turned lascivious eyes on the generous chest that strained against her nun's habit, and they whispered.

How could such rumors not reach Priestess's ears?

Her mind went back to the scene at the Adventurers Guild just before they had left.

§

"♪..."

Priestess's footsteps felt light as a feather as she walked through the Guild, the building bursting already with the morning sun's luminous rays. She hummed a hymn as she mentally listed the things she would need.

Gear—sometimes including weapons and armor—and items, particularly the usual consumables. Potions could go bad if they got old enough, and the grappling hook at the end of her rope could grow worn. Iron stakes could rust. It was important not just to replenish supplies after they had

been used, but to proactively replace things that were showing their age. When you really needed a healing potion, you didn't want to have to drink five or six to find one that worked.

The best way to avoid that situation, then, was always to check your bag and purchase new supplies as necessary.

This was what it meant for something to be habit.

Not that I want to be cavalier, but...

The thought that they were heading for a goblin hunt could be cause for unhappiness. She expected adventuring with him, with them, to be fun—or at least, she thought it would be—but the actual battle with the goblins...

She felt she had grown up somewhat, yet self-confidence still seemed to elude her. This wasn't good or bad—simply part of who she was, but anyway, she managed to be helpful sometimes. The diligent provision of supplies was the role Priestess had found for herself. Working at it with all her heart was her job, a respectable job that let her hold her little chest up high.

"Hey, y'hear the rumor?"

Thus, even when she caught the whisper, she paid it no mind at all. She had no reason to expect that it was anything to do with her.

"You mean the one about that cleric, the Earth Mother one?"

"Wha...?" She stopped short and found herself looking at some boys who, from the unblemished state of their equipment, she took to be new adventurers.

It was a year since the training grounds on the edge of town had been completed. During the construction, Priestess had herself lent a hand in the short span of time before the place truly got up and running. Still, the majority of the instructors were seasoned adventurers; Priestess was just an assistant. One could almost go so far as to say that taking the lead in the battle with those goblins had been all she had done.

The memory was precious to her now, because it had been the basis on which she had been promoted.

Naturally, her heart also ached for those who had died.

Many were the novices who had quit adventuring when they discovered the gulf between dreams and reality.

Now the facility's teachers were mostly old, retired adventurers, and Priestess was no longer part of it. Besides, there were plenty of new adventurers who chose not to receive any training.

All of which was to say, she had no reason to think this had to do with her...

"Oh, yeah, I know the one," the other adventurer replied with a nod. The blood drained from Priestess's face upon hearing what he said next. "There's supposed to be this girl who got attacked by goblins, right? An adventurer?"

Priestess couldn't speak. She clutched at her belongings; it was all she could do not to drop them.

Was there another cleric of the Temple of the Earth Mother who had failed a goblin hunt? Not that she remembered.

What should I do? she found herself thinking. *What should I do?* That was the only thought in her mind. Her knees started to shake a little.

"Not that one, dumbass," the first boy smirked. He wasn't looking in her direction. Priestess realized she had not been noticed, but she stayed rooted to the spot. "I mean the story that there's some goblin's kid there."

"Huh? A goblin's kid?"

"Eh, a friend of a friend told me. Not totally sure what he meant."

"But think about it." The boy smirked again. "That *dark-skinned* lady?"

What? Priestess thought. *What are these people talking about?*

"Ugh, no way. You mean the one who makes the wine? Crap, I drank some of that stuff."

"Yeah... Makes you sick to your stomach, huh?"

"They're *goblins*, right? You'd have to be serious trash to lose a fight with them."

"It's an easy win, long as they don't get you surrounded. The Great Hero would burst out laughing—*goblins*!"

"You know how it is—people who get in trouble with goblins turn into chicken littles. They're like, *Oh no! Goblins!*"

"If they think goblins are bad, I hope they never see a dragon. They'd drop dead on the spot!"

The boys' cackles echoed through the room; Priestess huddled into herself to block her ears. *We could handle a dragon if we had to!* The words pulsed relentlessly in her mind.

§

"...Concentrate," Goblin Slayer said—just one word—as he crept soundlessly over the leaf mold.

The word brought Priestess's attention back to the present. She shook her head. High Elf Archer and Dwarf Shaman looked exasperated for some reason she didn't understand. Lizard Priest shrugged, clearing away the reeds with what seemed like irritation.

The trees blocked out the sunlight, the humid air stagnant.

"I—I know...!" Priestess answered, dismayed and confused but alert to the smell, which was different from that of a goblin nest. She bit her lip and looked at the ground; she had been heedless of her feet. "I know, I really do..."

She looked just like a child who had been scolded by her parents. She squeezed her sounding staff, resenting herself, feeling pathetic.

I should have...

She should have said something. Why didn't she speak up? Why had she let the moment pass? Was it fear or something else?

Perhaps it was simply that her brain couldn't keep up with her emotions. Even now, hours later, she wasn't sure.

When and if we get home...

She repeated the name of the Earth Mother to herself, trying to regain some measure of composure. If she couldn't concentrate, she would die. She understood that all too well.

She was perfectly familiar with the sight of the others who, normally engaged in easy banter, had focused all their attention on preparing for combat. She would try to imitate them. She would try to be like them, she thought, as she took in a deep breath and let it out. The dregs of her ire stayed with her, of course, but there was such a difference between trying and not—

"Hey, do you smell something?" High Elf Archer whispered, her nose twitching.

The party stopped. A beat later, Priestess came to a halt, too, and looked around. A party could live and die on the senses of its scout—and no scout had better senses than an elf.

They listened hard, and then they heard something around them, a rustling as of something heavy moving through the leaves.

Maybe the sky above the trees was overcast and gray. That was what Priestess saw in her mind's eye as she sniffed the air. Rotting leaves, earth, humidity, all mingled together into a stale taste that clung to her tongue.

It's different from the smell of a cave, but...

"I hafta think a funeral mound like this always has smelled and always will," Dwarf Shaman said, but he still reached for his bag of catalysts and dropped into a fighting stance.

"I wonder how much time has passed since this place

went forgotten.”

“Who can say?” Dwarf Shaman responded to Lizard Priest with a stroke of his white beard and gazed thoughtfully up at the sky. “A hundred years or a thousand. Though I doubt it reaches back as far as the Age of the Gods. And I don’t think our friendly anvil there has a stuffy nose.”

“I’ll show you stuffy,” High Elf Archer growled, her ears sitting back, but Dwarf Shaman ignored her, whispering, “I also don’t think this mound is quite normal.”

“Goblins?”

“Can’t rightly tell,” Dwarf Shaman said and then shivered. “Wouldn’t be surprised for a wight to show up.”

“Wight,” Goblin Slayer echoed. “...I don’t know that word. Is it some kind of monster?”

“You don’t know *any* word except *goblin*.” High Elf Archer frowned, reaching for her quiver and pulling out a bud-tipped arrow. She set it gently into her bow as her ears swiveled this way and that, listening closely. “Wights are a type of spirit—cursed kings or generals who broke faith with a ruler and aren’t permitted to rest.”

“I myself am no specialist, but...” Lizard Priest stretched out his long neck, his hands playing over a dragon’s fang in his palm.

A fine mist had sprung up, but his lizardman eyes were untroubled by it. This party had a great diversity of races, including an elf, a dwarf, and a lizardman, so they were quite able to deal with poor visibility. Although it was a mystery to Priestess how the others were able to see so well in so little light.

“...I should much more expect spirits than goblins in these old burial grounds,” Lizard Priest concluded.

“Would goblins set themselves up where someone like that had lived...?” Goblin Slayer’s voice sounded softly from within the metal helmet. It was clear he didn’t like the situation. He kicked the dirt with the toes of his boots,

searching for footing. The earth was treacherously soft, and he came away with mud on his soles. "I don't like this."

Priestess swallowed heavily and clung to her staff. She felt a prickling on her neck, her hairs standing on end. It was an unpleasant sensation. She always had this feeling when something bad seemed about to happen. So she paid close attention to the funeral mound and everything within the vicinity, fixing her eyes on the shadows that flitted through the fog.

The pillar of stones piled one atop the other. The vestiges of a burial mound of heaped earth. Did she see something moving in between them?

It was not fair, perhaps, to say that was the reason she noticed. But she was the one who noticed the sign.

Zzf. Almost soundlessly, all by itself, some mossy earth trembled, and that was what Priestess noticed.

"Oh...!" she exclaimed. "The earth there...!"

The next instant, an arrow was flying. High Elf Archer drew the bow and released it with a twang like a lute string, too fast to see. A mound of earth seemed entirely unperturbed by the arrow that was now sticking in it, but it rose up, as if crumbling from within.

It was small, humanoid. It had nasty eyes and a foul smell.

Priestess could only imagine it was one thing: a goblin. Goblin Slayer seemed to think the same.

"So it was goblins. How many?!"

"Not sure!" High Elf Archer twitched her ears as she readied another arrow. "But they're coming from every direction!"

And so they were. The mounds of earth all around began to shake and collapse, enemies rising from the soil on every side. Priestess groaned and pressed a hand to her mouth to resist the nauseating stench that now surrounded them.

"Hoh-hoh. A sneak attack from within the earth." Lizard Priest looked around, his eyes sharp, but on his jaws was a

smile. "A rather refined stratagem for these little devils."

"We can admire them later! Beard-cutter, give us a plan!" Dwarf Shaman was reaching into his bag of catalysts.

Goblin Slayer, his shield and sword at the ready, gazed around at the encroaching enemy forms. Then again, strictly speaking, his helmet made it impossible to tell where he was looking. Priestess flinched as she felt him glancing at her.

"We'll form a circle, centered around you," he said quietly. "Get ready."

"Y-yes, sir!"

The adventurers acted in the blink of an eye. At a moment like this, action now was better than a clever idea later.

They surrounded Priestess protectively, ready with sword, bow, ax, and claws. High Elf Archer was in front of her, with Goblin Slayer to her left, Lizard Priest to her right, and Dwarf Shaman behind. In the middle of it all, Priestess bit her lip and looked carefully around with her staff in her hand. She was not looking, of course, at the enemy, which she couldn't see for the fog, but at her friends, how they were doing. Her job would be to keep them all abreast of any pertinent new information as the situation developed.

This role was second in importance only to the provision of miracles, and the responsibility and anxiety evidently weighed heavily on Priestess.

"They aren't moving very quickly, are they...?" she asked.

"No, they aren't," High Elf Archer replied, her bow creaking as she watched the shadows flicker in the fog.

Slick, flick. The figures got closer, step by step, and Priestess felt a chill run down her spine.

"They didn't go down even when I shot them. But I don't hear any armor... Something feels off about this."

"What do you think?" Goblin Slayer took note of High Elf Archer's appraisal and spoke softly to Lizard Priest in turn.

The proven warrior *hmmmed* and licked his nose with his

tongue, sucking in a breath. "Speaking from a purely personal perspective, I am not eager to cede the initiative on this occasion."

"I agree," Goblin Slayer said. "Stay in formation. We're going to cut our way through."

"Right!"

Forgetting the foreboding of a moment before, Priestess nodded emphatically. At this moment and this moment only, she felt she could let go of the fretfulness from the Guild.

Though she was hardly thankful to the goblins for their help.

§

"What is this?"

A goblin tumbled backward, a spray of blood erupting from his throat where a thrown sword had mercilessly stabbed him. Even from behind the veil of fog, the rotten stench of flesh and blood made their noses prickle.

The goblin fell with a thump, but then, soundlessly, its body floated up, rising slowly in the mist.

"These are not goblins," Goblin Slayer spat in frustration.

"They're obviously undead...!" High Elf Archer shouted back, firing off a literal hail of arrows. The bud-tipped bolts flew like lightning at angles that would be impossible for a human, disappearing into the mist. The ensuing *thock, thock* of arrows piercing flesh proved that her aim was true. But the squirming shapes in the fog continued to advance calmly on the adventurers despite the arrows bristling out of them.

High Elf Archer gave a graceless click of her tongue: They just couldn't seem to do enough damage. "Oh, for—! Why's it always like this lately? This is why I hate anything nonliving...!"

"Let us begin by breaking their legs!" Lizard Priest

lashed out with his long tail, wrapping it around some rotting legs and slamming their owner to the ground. There was a perverse sound like a bursting fruit, but the goblin could only writhe on the ground and did not get up again.

Lizard Priest wiped the filth from his tail and howled to his friends: "The flesh and bones are but complications; destroy them and the things will not move again!"

"Thought you weren't an expert on dead bodies...!"

"To my knowledge, the dead do only one thing—return to the earth. Are these things some kind of slime, perhaps?"

Dwarf Shaman shrugged at Lizard Priest's easy reply to his own banter and hefted his ax. He only had one hand to use, because the other was in his bag.

The blade of the ax bit through goblin limbs like tree branches, but it did little to forestall the dead, who knew no fear.

"If they get their hands on us, it's over," Dwarf Shaman said, working his short legs to keep up with his party. "We have to find the necromancer, Beard-cutter, and take him out!"

"Necromancer," Goblin Slayer echoed quietly. "He's controlling the goblins?"

"How are we supposed to know that if you don't, Orcbolg?!" High Elf Archer shouted. She had already put her great bow on her back and was holding her obsidian dagger in an ice-pick grip. She waved it menacingly, as if to say, *Get any closer and I'll cut you*, but the goblins did not waver. From left and right, they popped out of the ground, drawing ever closer.

High Elf Archer thrust her ears back in anger, cursing at them in elvish. The goblin corpses were many; the one saving grace was that they were slow. Circled up at the center of the horde, the party continued to move, not sure where they were going but diligently maintaining their formation.

They were, however, gradually being cornered. It was

only a matter of time until they broke ranks.

“Uh, um...!” From her place in the center, Priestess strained to see into the fog; she put a finger to her lips as a thought came to her. Necromancer: Good or evil, it was anyone who used magic to control corpses, or so she had heard. That meant this was a spell at work. An accursed one. And that meant...

“It must be coming from somewhere!” Her knowledge of the subject was fuzzy, but Priestess followed this flash of insight. “I don’t know if this is a goblin trick or the work of a true necromancer, but...”

“Then it is most likely to be at the top of the funeral mound.” Lizard Priest, raking the nearest corpse with his claws and tearing it apart, said easily, “If it were I, that is certainly where I would offer my blessings.”

Goblin Slayer picked up a sword at his feet, his helmet turning this way and that. It was likely this weapon had been buried with a soldier in this funeral mound. It was old, rusted, and he didn’t like the length. He gave it an experimental swing or two to feel it out, then looked at Priestess. “Can you stop it if we go to the source?”

“Yes, sir...!” Priestess nodded firmly, clutching her staff.

“Then it’s settled,” Goblin Slayer said. “We’ll head for the top of the mound.”

The adventurers nodded at each other and began moving as one. They worked their way up the gentle slope, carving a path through the goblins that came at them from every side. There were few parties that could have plunged through a horde quite like this one did. Goblin corpses might stand in front of them, but they were hardly in the way.

“Just have to cut off their legs—right...!” High Elf Archer mumbled as she ran ahead. She pulled out the bud-tipped arrows that had been so little help earlier. As she jogged along, she tapped one arrow with her dagger, causing the tip to split like a blooming flower.

High Elf Archer held her dagger between her teeth, and with all the grace of a flowing stream, she took the great bow off her back and loosed the arrow. The bowstring twanged with a sound like a musical instrument, and the arrow slithered along the ground before bouncing upward.

It went where it was intended: right at a goblin's loins...

"—?!"

The arrow spun around the point of impact, tearing through the legs with a sickening sound. If corpses had been capable of surprise, this one would have been shocked.

The adventurers stepped on and over the body where it lay, pressing ever forward.

"Whoo!" High Elf Archer exclaimed, the dagger still between her teeth and her ears bouncing up and down as she made ready for the next shot.

"Nasty business" was all Dwarf Shaman had to offer. "This is why they warn you never to go to war with elves..."

He could criticize all he wanted, but he was no slouch himself. With the rear of the formation entrusted to him, Dwarf Shaman took a waterskin out of his bag of catalysts. He pulled out the stopper and poured some of it on the ground—he was simply getting ready.

"Gnomes! Undines! Make for me the finest cushion you will see!"

Even creatures that do not know death must still stand upon the ground.

As Lizard Priest had said, the bones were merely a framework for these things, something on which to hang the flesh. When the ground suddenly bubbled up into mud, it swallowed their feet and sent them sprawling. They flailed and clawed, but it got them nowhere. After the mud had claimed their footing, after they had fallen into it with a great spray of wet earth, they were left essentially to drown.

They gave great swipes of their arms, like panicked

children, but they only continued to sink. As the goblin corpses continued to shuffle forward, lusting after the smell of the living, they simply got themselves mired in the muck, one after another. It would have been bad enough back when they had the intelligence of children, but now the goblins had lost even that.

“Beard-cutter! I’ve got the rear covered; just go!”

“All right” was all Goblin Slayer said before he sprang forward to the frontmost row. He flung his sword at a goblin corpse that wobbled in front of him, the blade burying itself deep in the creature’s head. He followed up by slamming his shield into its throat, digging through until he shattered the spinal cord.

“They are numerous, as always...” He gave a click of his tongue as he stomped on a still-twitching arm, tearing away the rotten flesh. “Goblins are a nuisance, even after death.”

“Goblin Slayer, sir!”

Priestess’s shout was answered by the immediate whoosh of a club. The weapon split open the head of a goblin that was working its way out of the earth, trying to grab Goblin Slayer’s foot. He kicked the creature in its newly concave face, then looked around without a word.

The enemy was indeed numerous. Overwhelmingly so. He could see ever more shadows writhing in the fog ahead. They almost looked like a single massive creature.

But I suppose that’s no different from usual.

That simple fact was unchanged.

“.....!”

Behind him, Priestess clasped her sounding staff with both hands, nodding with a resolute expression.

No problem, then. Having reached this decision, the party proceeded to cut through the fog with Goblin Slayer at its head. Upward, upward, ever closer to the top of the mound.

Eventually, all became the disturbing sounds of flesh being shattered and cut, ragged breathing, and squelching

mud. The occasional screams that echoed around the area were, they supposed, Lizard Priest's war cries. The restless dead were silent as their peaceful counterparts. There was only a low groan soon carried away by the wind.

Priestess blinked as drops of sweat ran down her forehead and into her eyes. The mist seemed to make her whole body cold and clammy, like rain, and her sodden garments clung to her skin. She pulled the hem of her skirt away from her legs, desperately trying to follow *him*, but her throat was tight with worry.

The outcome of this battle, the chance for everyone to come home alive, rode on her willowy shoulders. If her prayer for Dispel, together with Holy Light, didn't reach the Earth Mother, she didn't want to think about what would happen.

When their strength was finally exhausted, they would be taken by the mass of enemies, torn limb from limb, their guts split open, their honor besmirched, before they were finally eaten.

All of a sudden, she thought maybe she was still in that cave. Maybe she was in that filthy goblin hole right now, lolling in the filth heap, waiting to die.

Maybe she was just living some foolish dream as she lay reflected in the empty eyes of a horde of goblins. What could a little girl do who was capable only of collapsing in fear, weeping and calling the name of her god as her voice shook helplessly? That prayer would never reach heaven, and her friends would be shattered by the horde, murdered, and then she would follow, of course she would...

"Almost there."

The words were brief, quiet, mechanical. He didn't say *keep fighting* or *it's all right* or any other warm encouragement.

Priestess felt the space around her become brighter, and she replied "Right" in a small voice.

It is different. It is.

She took a deep breath, filling her lungs with as much air as her little chest could hold. That was enough navel-gazing. It was the all-merciful Earth Mother who provided miracles; Priestess was merely a conduit. All her other party members were doing their utmost, so she, likewise, would pray with all she had. She couldn't afford to be conceited.

The thought made the blood that had seemed stultified in her veins start to flow again, making her mind quicker, everything easier. Maybe that was why. Priestess blinked. She heard something on the misty mound, a strange sound that didn't come from the corpses...

"...?! Heek?!"

The next instant, Priestess's cap went flying, dancing through space along with several golden hairs from her head. She listened to the prickle at the back of her neck, throwing herself down into the mud: It was the right choice.

Something flew overhead with a whistle, something that had been headed for Priestess. Then it happened again.

"Oh, ahh...!" She let out a cry as she lay there, her clothing streaked with mud. Her boots had been badly torn as she tumbled down, almost like she had been shoved, and blood was running from her thigh. Closer inspection revealed a proper gouge in her vestments; the attack had clearly been intended to take her life. If it hadn't been for her chain mail, which glinted dully from regular use, the strike might have pierced her heart.

Then came the third blow...

"Above us!" Goblin Slayer said bitterly. "It's not a goblin."

There was a thump of flesh and bone being cleaved, and a rotten arm went flying and sank into the muck. Goblin Slayer threw away the goblin arm, which was now just a wrist, pulling a rusted sword from its belt. He held the weapon in a backward grip, quickly crouching beside Priestess.

"Can you stand?"

"I'll...be fine...!" Breathing hard and leaning heavily on her staff, Priestess managed to get unsteadily to her feet, only to collapse again from a shock of pain. It was not the pain but humiliation, the feeling of how pathetic she was, that brought the tears to her eyes. She would never reach the top of the mound—

"Wha...?!"

She had hardly finished the thought when she felt herself floating. It took her a moment to realize she was resting against Goblin Slayer's shoulder.

"Here we go."

"Oh! Y-yes, sir...!" She reached out as best she could to collect her hat, but at that instant there was another rush of air. Sparks flew from Goblin Slayer's upraised sword, along with flecks of rust that settled on her face.

"Can you take care of her?" Goblin Slayer asked quietly, unmoved by Priestess's embarrassed babbling.

The response came from his (it took him an instant and a breath, released inside that metal helmet) friend.

"Sure thing!" High Elf Archer replied immediately; she zagged toward them even as she loosed arrows into the fog. An elf's ears were the most sensitive things any word-haver possessed, and she could easily hit enemies she couldn't see. "I only got a look at it for a second, but there was some humanoid thing with wings—living, I think! It didn't look rocky!"

"Ah," Goblin Slayer replied. "Not a gargoyle, then."

High Elf Archer's ears twitched, and Priestess forgot her pain for a moment and blinked. "You... You know about those...?"

"Of course I do."

"Heavens—that's some kind of demon!" Dwarf Shaman worked his stubby legs to keep up even as his ax lashed out, smashing apart goblin corpses. He held his weapon at the ready to defend Goblin Slayer and Priestess, scanning the skies. He frowned as he heard the sound of wind swoop

around them. They had more than undead goblins to worry about now. This was not a positive development.

"Long-Ears, I think we've seen the likes of this before. You know what I mean."

"...I think this one moves differently."

"Well, there's major and minor ones."

"I think they should've called them aces and jokers...!" And then without so much as a twitch to give away what she was about to do, High Elf Archer loosed an arrow into the murk. The split-tipped bud wound away out of sight, answered by a great flapping of wings. The demon had changed course, hoping to avoid the incoming projectile. It had panicked.

But the arrow had not missed. No elf wasted a shot. In other words, she had *intended* to miss.

"Now!!"

"Rrahh!! Velociraptor, behold my leap!!" The shout rang through the mist as a great dark shadow raised its tail. This was an ambush, lizardman style.

"AAAARERRRERERREM?!" The demon, which had been staying silent to maintain the element of surprise, cried out with the impact.

To do the same thing as before was to recognize that there was no need for a great change in fighting tactics. Lizard Priest's claws and fangs once again grabbed hold of the demon, so that he was clinging to its back.

"AREEEM!! AREEEMEER!!" The demon screeched wildly, cursing the scaly creature on its back as it flapped its wings and rose into the air. Its plan was all for naught now. It had meant to start by destroying that pitiful little girl.

That was his goal, an ironclad rule of demonic battle: Start by taking out the cleric. Tear them apart until they looked like a worn-out dishrag. But now his hand had been forced. He would still kill them all, but he would have to start with this lizard.

All creatures died if they hit the ground hard enough. He

would bury this foolish fighter!

“ARRERMERE!!”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Foul creature, found on no branch of evolution’s tree!”

Even as the demon tried to gain altitude, he felt claws, both hands and feet, tearing at his back and wings; the creature wouldn’t come loose. Worse, the claws were tearing through his skin, spraying filthy demon blood everywhere. No matter the challenge, a lizardman would never overlook prey he could hunt.

The strong survive, and to be strong and to survive in every sense was the lizardmen’s justice and truth. Lizard Priest took hold of the bat-like wings, a wild grin on his face. “Wings such as these are disrespectful to the pterodactyl! I’ll have to get rid of them!!”

And then with a howl, his fangs bit into the demon’s throat.

“ARRRRRARARRRRMMM?!?!?”

The scream didn’t even hold meaning anymore. The lizardman’s claws ripped relentlessly through the demon’s wings, claspings the twisted bones, squeezing them. And finally, Lizard Priest with his great strength tore the monster’s wings clear off, tossing them away like so much garbage.

“AARAMM?! ARARAMMMMRREERMMMMM?!”

All that remained was the fall.

No one could say what the demon thought as he spiraled toward the earth. Blood and screams followed him like a long tail, like a comet crashing to the ground. A geyser of mud shot into the air, causing Dwarf Shaman—half-soaked in the stuff—to mutter, “That’s a better funeral than he deserves.”

“Hey, are you still alive?!” High Elf Archer cried, but Lizard Priest sat up and replied calmly, “Oh, that was nothing.” He spat the foul demon blood from his mouth, then gave a great shake to get the mud off his body. With

his tremendous feet, he stepped on the demon where it lay still twitching, craning his neck to look down at it. "Keep moving forward; don't worry about this one!"

"R-right...!" Priestess nodded, fighting the pain, and Goblin Slayer silently continued walking. *Just look where you're going.* Nothing could be easier. Paying special attention to his left side, where Priestess was, he worked his rusty sword in swift, short strokes, chopping off goblin legs, treading over the bodies.

His sword broke in half as he slew his umpteenth goblin, but now it was the perfect length. Yes, this was how long a sword should be. Goblin Slayer gave a flourish of his blade and then flung it forward. It flew straight and true, not tumbling end over end, lodging in a goblin's throat.

"Yikes!" Priestess yelped as Goblin Slayer swept her up, jumping forward and kicking the goblin down, crushing it underfoot.

There was a stench of blood and mud, mixing with the reek of rot that came from corpses and the unmistakable odor of spilled innards. Everything was exactly the way it always was. The difference was that there was no screaming; the goblin who ought to have been dead simply squirmed under his boot.

The goblins were unarmed; they simply shambled forward with eyes empty and hands outstretched.

"I don't like this."

These were not goblins.

Goblin Slayer looked at his sword, which had been reduced to only its hilt. He had no supply of weapons. He set Priestess down carefully, raising the shield on his left arm.

"Can you make it?"

"I..." Priestess put her feet to the earth and groaned with pain. "I can...!"

"Good."

Priestess nodded, holding back the tears that pricked at

her eyes, and set off walking, dragging one leg. They were so close to the top now. That short distance seemed so far.

Seized for an instant by a sort of regret, she looked back, and there was his round shield swinging behind her. It was so small, but the sharpened edge cut through rotten limbs like a hatchet through branches. Beyond that were High Elf Archer's arrows, Dwarf Shaman's ax, and Lizard Priest's claws and fangs and tail, all perpetrating great violence.

The mist seemed oddly thin; Priestess could see the whole battle, which should have been concealed from her by the fog.

All of a sudden, High Elf Archer's ears twitched, and she looked up and waved with a smile. Priestess nodded. Her leg hurt as badly as if her very heart were located within it, but she pressed on the wound, took a breath, and forced herself to her feet as she let the air out. She reached out to her staff as if in supplication; the blood from her wound—*her* blood—trickled down it.

She clutched the staff.

The plague demons that had run roughshod over the continent in the past had used something beyond simple curses to control corpses, or so it was said. If the same thing was happening now—*if*. That was the fear that lodged in her chest, but she took a breath and snuffed it out.

All that was left was prayer. She would not *do* anything. She was just a conduit.

So I don't have anything to worry about.

She took one last look at that grungy helmet, then squeezed her eyes shut and prayed. It was a direct connection of her awareness to the heavens above. Gentle, soothing fingers brushed the heart of this most devout disciple.

"O Earth Mother, abounding in mercy, grant your sacred light to we who are lost in darkness...!!"

There was a flash, a light at once merciful and merciless, that wiped out the accursed fog in a white darkness.

“Oh, wow...”

As the mist cleared as if swept away with a broom, High Elf Archer was the first to speak. She crested the top of the funeral mound, kicking the damp, mossy earth on her way, and looked around.

The sky was blue, the air was clear, and the wind was a pleasant tickle on her ears. There was a sense of peace here, as if it were a different place from the fog-shrouded hilltop of just a moment ago.

Row upon row of inert pillars of earth stood around them. High Elf Archer tapped one right next to her with her bow, and it crumbled into a pile of soft soil. This was what had become of the monsters that had stalked them and threatened them until the miracle occurred.

High Elf Archer had been witnessing these divine miracles with her own eyes for more than two years now, but she was still astonished by what they could achieve.

“They all just turned into...dirt...”

“Ashes to ashes and dust to dust, as they say.” Lizard Priest, still dragging along his heavy body, sounded downright relaxed. It was only natural that his movements would still be slow; he pulled something out of his bag to use as a palate cleanser—a wedge of cheese. High Elf Archer doubted, though, how good it could really taste when he hadn’t even rinsed out his mouth yet. “I know not of the devils of that other realm, but so long as the goblins die as well, then all is right in earth and heaven. This thing is well done.”

“Hey, that’s right, the injury...!”

High Elf Archer was not, of course, talking about Lizard Priest. He was the hardiest of any of them. The braids of her hair flew as she rushed up the hillside, giving Dwarf Shaman a knock on the head on the way by and receiving a

"Mm!" and a look in return.

"Where is she?!"

"Up there," said Goblin Slayer as she passed by. "Go and tend to her." He was knocking over the piles of earth that had once been goblins to ensure that they had, in fact, stopped moving.

"I'm on it," High Elf Archer said and redoubled her speed, reaching the top of the hill in an eyblink. "Are you okay?!"

"I'm sorry...it took me so long..." Priestess was there, collapsed on the ground, her face pale, but with a heroic smile. There was a large tear in her cleric's vestments but no sign that anything had gone through her chain mail.

What caught High Elf Archer's attention instead was Priestess's leg, splayed out behind her. Blood was seeping through a bandage wrapped around the wound. The elf crossed her arms somberly.

"Times like this, I wish *I* could use miracles," she said.

"No, I might still be able to manage..."

"...That's *him* talking, and I don't like it."

Priestess could only smile painfully at her friend giving her a click of the tongue, as she leaned on her staff and worked her way to her feet. But the strength just wouldn't enter her legs; she trembled like a child learning to walk and wasn't sure she could stay standing.

Geez... High Elf Archer sighed but then smiled as if to say, *No other choice*. "C'mere, grab on."

"Th-thank you..."

"Just do it," High Elf Archer ordered, dismissing Priestess's air of abject apology, and then she let the girl lean against her. High Elf Archer was not much less delicate-looking than Priestess, but elves have rather greater physical abilities than humans.

"Gotta say, though, I'm impressed," High Elf Archer remarked, adjusting how she was supporting the girl. "Taking out all those zombies in one shot."

"I just assumed that undead would be vulnerable to anything that removed curses... I'm glad it worked." Priestess put a hand to her chest in a gesture of relief, but meanwhile, she was covered from head to toe in mud. Her cap, her lovely golden hair, her white garments and boots, all of it. To be fair, it was perfectly understandable, given that she had fallen in the mud.

"Sheesh..." As High Elf Archer looked at the girl, who appeared happy, oblivious to the filth that streaked her cheeks and even the tip of her nose, all anger toward her vanished. *But I'll have to give Orcbolg a piece of my mind.*

Her eyes quickly spotted him, having some sort of discussion with Dwarf Shaman. Of course, even at this distance, her ears were quite capable of picking up what they were saying.

"What do you think?"

"I couldn't begin to guess whether there's such a thing as a goblin necromancer, but I wouldn't assume that demon earlier was the one behind this."

"You think not?" Goblin Slayer said, sounding surprised. "I thought this was the sort of thing demons did."

"Maybe the greater ones, like the one in that dungeon recently—the one that was just an arm..." Dwarf Shaman took a swig from the flask at his hip, then looked at the sky with a thoughtful twirl of his beard. "But this one struck me as a servant, not a master. Although, I'll admit he was pretty strong for a lesser demon."

"A hob, in goblin terms."

"If you can even compare goblins and demons," Dwarf Shaman said with a frown. "This thing was stronger than any hob, but as far as a place in the hierarchy, I suppose you've got the right idea."

"So there was another giving him instructions..."

"That's how it was in the battle ten years ago."

Ten years ago—the delving of the deepest maze in this world, the Dungeon of the Dead. The overflowing of death

had created an army of the deceased, turning all the world mad. The ambitions of Chaos—to which the six adventurers, upon reaching the dungeon's innermost chamber, had put a stop—were still fresh in the memory. Even this slayer of goblins and his party had lately challenged that abandoned labyrinth themselves.

"The one thing I don't understand is what they wanted. Y'don't make a horde of zombies just to attack a village."

"That's what a goblin would do."

"Don't think it's a goblin," Dwarf Shaman said. "I think there's a source of impurity under that burial mound, or otherwise this is the work of some evil cultist's ritual, or..."

There was no end to the possibilities. It wasn't precisely a fool's errand, but they totally lacked the manpower to find the truth.

"Think it might be best to let the Guild know for starters. Then we can get other adventurers investigating this."

"Yes," Goblin Slayer said with a nod. "If it's not a goblin, it's more than I can handle."

High Elf Archer's ears sat back on her head to discover that he was *still* talking about goblins. "Come on, Orcbolg! You have to do a *slightly* better job than this of looking out for people!"

The answer she received was brusque, as ever. "I do feel bad about it."

She sniffed, and Priestess, caught between the two of them, shrank into herself even further. "Oh, no... I-I'm fine..."

"Let me remind you that it *is* okay to be a little angrier at him sometimes."

"I'm sorry," Priestess said, shrinking further, and High Elf Archer simply sighed.

Dwarf Shaman, sensing his moment, broke in easily, "Don't squawk, Anvil. You know Beard-cutter cares in his own way."

"Yeah, well... Yeah."

“More importantly: Is there anything else moving around here?”

“No, nothing. Not a sound. Other than us.” High Elf Archer gave a proud twitch of her ears.

“All right,” Dwarf Shaman said, forced to acknowledge the superiority of the elf’s hearing.

So the battle was over, for now. Priestess finally relaxed, bowing her head to Goblin Slayer, who had arrived at the hilltop. “I’m sorry, Goblin Slayer, sir. If only I could have done a better job...”

“...” Goblin Slayer didn’t respond immediately, but the helmet flitted in High Elf Archer’s direction. There was a low rumble, then it turned toward Priestess. “...You have nothing to be sorry for.”

Is that it? No, it wasn’t. Priestess understood by now: This was the silence of him looking for the words.

“You did well... You were a help to us.”

“Yes, sir!” Those words were all she needed to hear. Her face brightened, and she nodded eagerly. If she’d had a tail, it would have wagged.

“How’d you like that, Orcbolg? Things didn’t quite go according to plan, and there was no treasure, but...” High Elf Archer gave a proud “Heh-heh,” spreading her hands wide. “We fought unknown monsters, cut our way through a horde of enemies, and triumphed over undeath! If that’s not an adventure, nothing is.”

“Yes... Although, it was not goblin slaying.”

That only seemed to make High Elf Archer happier. “It sure wasn’t!” she said.

Maybe she was too busy being pleased to hear it. But Priestess caught the quiet whisper.

Goblin Slayer, not attempting to hide the displeasure in his voice, growled quietly, “Then...where *are* the goblins?”

There are only a few things that move faster than rumor: wind, light. Perhaps a thunderbolt.

“Hey, didja hear? At the Temple of the Earth Mother, there’s—”

“Oh yeah, the goblin’s—”

The whispers in the buzzing tavern seemed innumerable. But that was typical for the drinking establishment attached to the Adventurers Guild. Those within often believed without proof, and just as often claimed to know that which they had neither seen nor heard.

It was not simply that they were feckless gawkers. In this whole world, there was no information you could be totally certain of, even that you had confirmed for yourself. You might be misled by illusions; your own ignorance might cause you to mistake what was right in front of your nose; or there might be someone pulling the strings from the shadows.

In the underworld, it was said that if you were going to dinner with your own grandmother, you’d better be sure to check out any dirt on her. It was true—and how much more so when you were dealing with novice adventurers. At best, they knew the myths and stories they’d heard from their village elders or their parents, vague tales of long-vanished times. Yes, they might be brave, and they might know how to seize an opportunity—they had, after all, left their towns and become adventurers. But all too few of these young people knew how to listen to a rumor, still less how to ascertain its truth.

If anything, it could be called a privilege granted only to the young: the courage to take on the world with no knowledge and no experience, just one’s own wits. It was too grand a thing to disparage as simple foolishness or stupidity.

So the rumors that flew around the tavern were an embodiment of youthful vigor—but still.

“Urrrgh...”

That was not how they felt to Priestess, freshly returned from defeating restless goblin corpses and the demon who commanded them. She let out a sound somewhere between a groan and cry from where she was slumped over, an empty cup in her hand. Her face and skin, so pale until a moment ago, were bright red now, and the enthusiasm of her drinking made even Dwarf Shaman's eyes go wide.

It was most unusual for her—perhaps the first time ever, in fact—but she was well and truly drowning her cares in drink.

"G-gee, should you really be letting it get to you like that?" High Elf Archer rubbed Priestess's back consolingly. "Rumors have a pretty short shelf life. Everyone'll forget about it pretty soon, I'm telling you."

"A rumor that disappears 'pretty soon' for the elves is a legend that's told for centuries among the rest of us," said Dwarf Shaman.

"What else am I supposed to say?" High Elf Archer shot back, raising her eyebrows with a *keep-out-of-this* look.

Dwarf Shaman, however, ignored her, pouring himself more wine from the jug and drinking it down in a single gulp. High Elf Archer's eyebrows got even higher at what seemed to be his total lack of concern for Priestess.

"Goodness' sake," Dwarf Shaman said, like a master confronted with a dense apprentice. "Sometimes you *need* bad wine. Let the girl drink until she feels like stopping."

"I still think we should do something..."

"We will, if she's about to drown. Sometimes it's best just to vomit it all up."

Besides, the girl keeps too much pent up inside.

They didn't know much of one another's backgrounds—did friendship need any prologue?—but it had now been a bit over two years since they'd come together as a party. He knew only that this girl had been raised as an orphan at the Temple of the Earth Mother. Yet he also well understood that she put the feelings and happiness of others before her

own.

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“Me, I think Beard-cutter could afford to take it easier on her.” Dwarf Shaman patted Priestess’s slim shoulders with a rough hand, gently, as she made an inarticulate sort of moaning noise.

Amused to see Priestess so thoroughly inarticulate, Lizard Priest rolled his eyes merrily in his head. “Heavens, I’m sure she wishes to show off for our Goblin Slayer.” The cleric was relaxing on his seat—a barrel he was using in place of a chair. “If she were more tender, I believe a bit of indulgence would not go amiss, but one wishes she could be made to realize that the shell has come off this egg.”

Still, the lizardman reflected, it was too much to bear, too embarrassing to rant and rave, and too humiliating to be unable to act. Thus, she found herself leaning on the rest of them. Lizard Priest chuckled softly. It was unmistakably the laugh of a vicious, carnivorous beast, yet at the same time, it contained a deep well of love, the laugh of a monk.

High Elf Archer *hmm*ed as if she was not impressed, then splayed herself out on the table in imitation of Priestess. The elf lay there with her arms outstretched, her head lolling to one side, only her eyes turning to take in Lizard Priest. “You’re supposed to be a monk; you could stand to say something more monkish.”

“Well, now...” Confronted with her look, Lizard Priest touched the tip of his nose with his tongue thoughtfully. A high elf was looking at him with eyes brimming with the spirits of wine, clearly incensed. Any normal man would have been intimidated. Lizard Priest, however, was unmoved; he only opened his jaws and said calmly, soberly: “One may, I believe, safely disregard such idle chatter as what we have been hearing... At least, such as my personal opinion.”

“Look, we have no idea if it’s true or not,” High Elf Archer said, sticking out her pointer finger and drawing a lazy circle in the air. “But there’s gotta be someone who started this rumor, right? And they’re guilty of bad-

mouthed our girl's senior nun."

The rumors disgusted her, and it wasn't as if they concerned a total stranger. High Elf Archer had seen her friends and her forest targeted by goblins. She herself had even been subjected to them once. She wasn't the type to linger over unpleasant memories, but there was no question it had been a terrifying experience. So now her long ears drooped pitifully, and she mumbled, "Don't you wonder...what they were thinking?"

"Groundless rumors are the fundamental stuff of battle. They are not incantations nor curses." Lizard Priest shook his head gently but spoke firmly, as if to overrule the elf's quiet words. "Where there is hostility but no courage, then it is more certain than the falling of a star that the foe will be silenced by strength."

"...You don't, like, hate hearing something awful being said about you?"

"If that is enough to break me, it means I was the weaker. And not worth fearing in the first place." His brusque declaration sounded very much in character.

But it was too much for High Elf Archer, who muttered, "*Barbarian*," but giggled.

"Well, aren't we having quite the lovely time?" quipped Dwarf Shaman.

"How could we not when we are drinking with our dear cleric?" replied Lizard Priest.

The two men smiled at each other and shrugged as if to say there was nothing more to do. When they needed to, they would enlist the help of some other female adventurers to get the girls up to their rooms. In the meantime, they would drink the night away—that's what they were planning, anyhow, when:

"All right, food's here!" With a padding of feet, the waitress bustled up to the party's table. The tray she carried bore a basket of bread and some kind of steaming metal stewpot.

“Food...?” High Elf Archer inquired, lifting her head and sniffing the air.

“Meal’s here, all right,” Dwarf Shaman said. “Now get off the table before you get burned.”

“Yaaay, food!” High Elf Archer raised her hands in celebration.

Lizard Priest, meanwhile, reached out and gently rearranged Priestess into a sitting position.

“Mrrf...?”

“I think you had best put some food into that belly along with your wine, or you may find your stomach quite upset.”

“Uh-huh,” Priestess mumbled like an overtired child, but she managed to hold herself upright. Barely—her head drooped dangerously where she sat...

“One dried ice fish in garlic oil, here you go!” Into the newly cleared space on the table, Padfoot Waitress placed a small stewpot that looked very, very hot. Olive oil bubbled inside. There were stalks of onion, boiled until they were limp, and then a small fish. Boiled with garlic and spices, it produced an indescribable aroma; Lizard Priest’s nostrils flared as he took it in. Though perhaps he was in fact smelling the bread and cheese in the basket that accompanied the fish.

“I thought the season for ice fish was winter, just before they lay their eggs. Is it any good right now?” Dwarf Shaman peered into the pot with interest, squinting at the slightly pungent steam.

“Heh!” Padfoot Waitress sniffed, puffing out her shapely chest. “Spring was cold this year, you see. You can still catch some ice fish carrying their roe!”

Now all the proof would be in the eating. Dwarf Shaman took himself a heaping helping of fish and onions and began munching away at it. There was a tingle of spices, followed by soft fish flesh bursting in his mouth, meeting the texture of the onions—it was beyond words.

High Elf Archer had appeared suspicious at first, but

when she finally tried an onion, she was quite pleased to discover it was good. Lizard Priest, for his part, was putting the cheese on the bread, dipping it in the soup, and then eating it, accompanied by cries of "Sweet nectar!"

"What's with her?" Padfoot Waitress asked, gesturing at Priestess. "She get her poor little heart broken?" The cleric was listlessly sipping from her spoon. "I brought this food by thinking maybe she was depressed..."

"It's that *rumor* that's been going around," High Elf Archer grumbled, looking at Padfoot Waitress from under heavy eyelids. "Dirty, rotten rumors! What's so much fun about them?"

She didn't seem to be speaking to, or indeed glaring at, anyone in particular, but rather at the entire phenomenon of spreading stories.

"Ah," Padfoot Waitress said, unperturbed by High Elf Archer's evident ill temper. "Yeah, can't say I'm a big fan of that sort of thing myself. But I guess the people with the sharpest ears have already started to act."

"How do you mean?" Lizard Priest asked pointedly, halting the progress of his bread and cheese.

"Hmm?" Padfoot Waitress replied, pressing the pads of her paws into her cheeks. Perhaps she hadn't expected such a sharp response from him. "I mean, there's already this merchant from the water town asking if we don't want to buy his wine instead of the stuff from the Earth Mother's temple."

"A merchant, eh...?" Dwarf Shaman growled.

"Quicker to strike than any predator I know of," Lizard Priest said.

"Well, for what it's worth, the old man turned them down."

As well he might. The rhea chef was altogether too good-hearted a person, too capable and trustworthy, for such mischief. He knew the difference between what he had seen and heard for himself and a merchant who had come

drifting along on the currents of rumor.

Of course, sometimes following those currents could lead to the best outcome. It was, in effect, a question of one's personal stance. Living and dying were as close as two sides of a sheet of paper. It was as true for merchants as it was for adventurers.

"What do you make of it, Master Spell Caster?"

"Afraid I don't know any more than you do, Scaly."

Dwarf Shaman and Lizard Priest held a whispered conference about just such a stance. They questioned whether it was possible to respond so promptly to a story that had only begun to circulate in the past couple of days. With merchants, though, it would be a surprise if there *wasn't* something going on behind the scenes.

When there were large sums of money involved, there were often runners in the shadows. There were coins to count, potential profit and loss to calculate; and where money was involved, dwarven knowledge often applied, but...

I just don't know.

He hadn't had enough wine yet; that was the problem. Dwarf Shaman nodded sagely, filled another cup with wine from the Temple of the Earth Mother, and took a drink.

"Where *is* that weirdo friend of yours anyway?" Padfoot Waitress said, putting her hands on her hips as she picked up the thread of the conversation. "Now of all times, he ought to be looking after this girl..."

"Goblin Slayer?" To their surprise, it was Priestess who spoke up, in a voice that was quiet but—much like his—carried well. "...He made his usual report, and he went home, just like he always does."

"Argh," Padfoot Waitress said, pressing her paw pads to her forehead and looking up at the ceiling. *Weird is one thing, but he's stupid, too!*

"They weren't goblins."

"What, really?"

"They were corpses," he said. Then added, "That moved."

"I see, goblin zombies... Anything else?"

His helmet tilted at the question. He went silent, evidently thinking. There was a pause.

"And a demon."

"Demon?"

"It was red." It seemed like that was all he was going to say, but then he appeared to remember something else. "It flew in the sky."

I see. Guild Girl gave a quick nod, her pen scratching over the report paper sitting on the counter in front of her.

After any given adventure, it was the job of the Guild to take down the adventurer's report, formalizing it as paperwork. It was important, not least because these reports would form the basis for any potential promotions—they reflected, as it were, the adventurer's experience points. Of course, some of the less savory adventurers had been known to exaggerate their own accomplishments, so one always had to be careful. Guild employees could not simply take everyone at their word, and figuring out who to trust was part of their role.

Then again... Guild Girl let out a mental sigh, stealing a glance into the helmet across from her... *This particular adventurer doesn't seem to have any interest in further promotions.*

Meaning this was her chance to sneak in a little chitchat—call it a fringe benefit. Of course, one mustn't mix one's professional and private lives, and she would never think of giving less than her best effort to her work, but...

"What's wrong?"

"Oh, uh, nothing."

She hadn't expected the question; she quickly shook her head, sending her braid bouncing.

Her pen must have stopped moving. Or perhaps he had

noticed her looking at him. Guild Girl cleared her throat to hide her embarrassment and forcefully changed the subject. "So, ahem... What do you think?"

"Of what?"

"That girl," Guild Girl said, discreetly looking down. "You know, there are all those rumors..."

Although there was still a childlike quality to Priestess, it had already been two years since she'd become an adventurer. She had turned seventeen. Even as she grew into her womanhood, she was maturing as an adventurer, and in the near future, they would have to talk about promoting her again.

And in the middle of all that came these unsavory rumors about goblins. She was like a little sister, a valuable friend, and someone who was on her way to becoming a stalwart adventurer. This wasn't confusing professional and private: In this case, Guild Girl's professional and private feelings pointed the same way, and she couldn't let this matter go.

"Well..." Goblin Slayer grunted from inside his helmet. "She did appear to be somewhat disheartened."

"...Do watch out for her, won't you?"

"I doubt it would mean much if I spoke to her." He shook his head slowly. "The most I could say is that she's all right, so there is nothing to worry about. But what purpose would it serve?"

"Well, you're not wrong, exactly..." Guild Girl thought back. Back to Priestess's first adventure.

The party members she had met at the Guild. A group of people who still didn't know one another but who forged ahead based on dreams and hope and a sense of what was right.

It would be easy to ridicule them, to say they were thoughtless, foolish. But she didn't see it that way. She was sure there was something there, something precious within them that they shared with every adventurer. The only problem, the simple, unfortunate fact, was that they had

overreached themselves, gotten ahead of the growth of that thing...

And only one adventurer had survived. A girl, orphaned a second time.

The entire fact that she had stood back up, and was progressing forward, was thanks to one thing: him and their party members.

So what could he say? *That's why you shouldn't worry about it; the rumors aren't about you anyway?*

True, that would be no kind of help to her.

She thought she knew what *he* believed. That if one did not stand up and move on one's own, one's situation would not change.

Guild Girl, though, set down her quill pen and let a smile come onto her face, different from the one she had to put there by force. "When you're hurting, sometimes...it can make you surprisingly happy when someone goes out of their way to do something for you, you know?"

Like if you were buried in quests, and someone appeared who took them on. Or if you were attacked on the night of a festival, and someone came to rescue you.

"...I see." Goblin Slayer sounded like he was thinking about it, and then, abruptly, he went silent. He took a deep breath before his next soft murmur. "I admit, it doesn't make much sense to me."

Guild Girl spent another few minutes listening to Goblin Slayer's report and creating the paperwork. When they were done, he stood up with a simple, "All right," and began to walk off with his usual heavy stride. But then he suddenly stopped, and his helmet turned toward the tavern. Priestess was there, her face flushed with wine, surrounded by their friends, who were chattering away.

For a moment, he stood and watched them, then slowly worked his way out of the Guild.

Confronted by the gently swinging door, Guild Girl could only sigh.

“Psst, hey... C’mere!”

He had just gotten out the door and into the night when Goblin Slayer found his arm grabbed. Dragged into the shadows, he managed to free his arm and get a look at his interlocutor. It was a living creature, humanoid, completely concealed under a battered overcoat.

A goblin?

No, not a goblin. It was too tall and its voice too high. He dropped his hips and put his hand on his sword, completely alert. Behind the visor of his helmet, he moved only his eyes, scanning the area. They were behind the Guild, where materials for the workshop and ingredients for the kitchen were stored. He came here often when he was helping *her*. He had a sense of the terrain. He could move around. There would be no problem.

“What?”

“...You don’t have to growl at me like that,” the figure in the overcoat said, chuckling awkwardly. “It’s not like we don’t know each other.”

“In that case,” Goblin Slayer replied, feeling out the footing with his toe, “take off your coat.”

He detected a sigh of breath, and the other person resignedly removed their outerwear.

Waves of black hair spilled forth like a roiling sea, and he saw dark skin. “I was trying to keep a low profile here...” Sister Grape looked away, nervously scratching her cheek.

Goblin Slayer slowly took his hand off his sword and straightened up. There was no need for such caution after all. “I simply thought you might be a goblin.”

“Was that a hint of sarcasm I detected?”

“No,” he replied, shaking his head. Then after a moment’s silence, he added, “At least, that wasn’t my intention.”

"Hmm," Sister Grape said, and her face broke into a smile. "It's nice to meet a man who knows what he wants."

"Is that so?"

"Mm-hmm."

The conversation halted for a moment. Sister Grape fiddled uncomfortably with her hair, and Goblin Slayer waited for what she would say next. "Uh, say..."

"What is it?"

"Erk," Sister Grape yelped, caught off guard by the instantaneous reaction to the words she had worked so hard to summon. Still, she managed a small cough and gathered her battered courage. Whatever one was doing, by starting it face-to-face, it was impossible to turn back. "The girl... I just wondered, how's she feeling?"

"How do you mean," Goblin Slayer murmured, "how's she feeling?"

"Just, you know, she isn't pushing herself too hard on adventures or..." Sister Grape stumbled through what was clearly a cover, before she finally said what was on her mind. "Maybe I'm just thinking too much into things, but look. I was, you know, worried that the rumors about me might be a problem for her."

Goblin Slayer didn't answer immediately. He went silent inside his helmet, though there was an audible grunt. He didn't know how best to respond. "She's doing well," he said, then paused distinctly. "At least, I think so."

"I see..." *Mm.* Sister Grape nodded, then leaned back against a wooden box behind her. Had she relaxed a little? Goblin Slayer thought she looked less tense. "I see. If she's doing well, then that's great. That's all I need to hear."

In fact...

"It seems like she's moving on up. I'd hate to think I had gotten in her way. That would be awful."

In fact, she looked to him like his older sister, insisting with a smile on her face that she was okay.

"How could you get in her way?" Goblin Slayer said,

almost before he meant to. Sister Grape blinked at the forceful question. "You couldn't possibly."

"...Glad to hear that," Sister Grape replied, and then she put the overcoat back on, her smile vanishing into the darkness. "Guess I'd better be on my way, then."

"..." Goblin Slayer's helmet turned, indicating the window of the tavern, which was illuminated with a warm light. "You're sure?"

"I'm sure." Sister Grape nodded. "I told you, I don't want to cause her any trouble."

"Is that so?"

"All there is to it."

"See you," she said with a wave of her hand, and then she slipped off into the dark. The adventurers she passed, catching sight of the vestments of someone from the Temple of the Earth Mother, glanced after her. Their whispering voices somehow seemed all too audible inside the metal helmet.

Goblin Slayer grunted softly, glowered up at the sky with its two moons, and then, without another word, walked away.

§

The night did not seem to belong to spring or summer or fall, but might have been part of any of them or none of them. Unusually, there was no breath of wind, the air sitting heavy over the land. The starlight was slight, and the red moon shone dim; only the green moon glowed brightly.

Goblin Slayer was no astrologer. He couldn't divine the workings of fate and chance in the movement of the stars. So he paid no further attention to the heavens but looked down and walked on his way.

He didn't like it.

He didn't like any of it.

Even though he was walking down a dusty dirt path, his feet felt as heavy as if he were dragging them through the mud. At every step, he had to wrench his boot from the earth, and he brought it back down as if kicking the very ground beneath him.

Had he looked up, he might have been able to see the lights of the farmhouse in the distance by now. But he never did look up; not at the lights and not at the stars, but only down at the mud.

It was, indeed, a long road. He seemed to remember those were the words to a song his master had sometimes hummed.

He couldn't shake the sense that the road went ever on and on and that he would never return home. He felt abandoned in the darkness between the bustle of town, the lights of the house he was trying to get back to, and the spreading fields around. He even felt that he could smell the stench from under the floor that night, dredged up from deep within his memory.

He said nothing but only ground his teeth. That was all in his mind. The things in front of him at this moment, that was all he needed to be paying attention to. Everything else was over.

"....."

He finally looked up when he heard the sound. He knew from traveling this road time and time again that this sound did not belong here at night.

It was the heedless clattering of wheels and the thump of horses' hooves. A fluttering light was coming from the direction of the farm toward him, approaching fast.

A carriage? Even as he put a hand to his sword, Goblin Slayer took a step to one side to open the road. Two horses went racing past him; they seemed to see no value in sparing a glance at the grimy adventurer. They were followed by a carriage so ornate the luxury of it was evident even veiled in darkness, despite the poor light of the stars

and moons. The driver was well appointed, wielding the reins with pretension even as he held his hat to his head.

Goblin Slayer watched them go in the direction of the town until they disappeared as if covered over with black paint, and then he shook his head.

Truly, he didn't like any of this at all.

§

"...Ahh, you're back?" The calm, quiet voice greeted him as he arrived at the gate of the farm sometime later.

He turned his helmet until he discovered the owner of the farm leaning against a gate post. "What's the matter?"

"Just went to check on the cows." It sounded like an excuse. Then the owner fixed him with a stare, his mouth opening and closing a few times. After a moment's hesitation, he seemed to simply give up; he said impassively, "Little late tonight, aren't you?"

"No," Goblin Slayer told him, but then thought for a second before adding slowly, picking his words, "It seems a carriage was here."

"There was," the owner replied, with a disgusted shake of his head. "A wine merchant, from the water town. And no minnow, either."

"A wine merchant?"

"Wanted to know if I was interested in focusing on field work, turning this whole place to barley fields. Seems like he wants to brew his own beer."

"..." There was a grunt from inside the helmet. He didn't know whether that was a sound business proposition or not. And it was not for the ignorant to offer comment. That was a matter for the owner, and *her*. He was well aware that it was not his place to go offering opinions. He intended to behave like it.

"...Turned him down, I did."

Hence, he was acutely aware of the way the breath involuntarily sighed out of his mouth when the owner said this. He didn't quite know why, but he felt as if something immensely quiet within his heart had been satisfied.

"It's not about whether it would be clever to do something new or best to keep doing something old..." The owner crossed his arms and looked up at the stars as if unsure how to conclude. *He* imitated the gesture, looking at the sky. The stars and the moons shone so brightly it almost hurt. He squinted behind his visor. The owner glanced at him and, after a moment, said softly, "...But I happen to like my life the way it is."

"...Yes." He nodded slowly. On this one point, he was sure. It was one of the few things he could declare with confidence. "I think you have a good farm."

"That so...?" the owner said shortly, then repeated tonelessly, "That so..." At length he said, "The girl's waiting for you with dinner."

"Yes, sir."

"Eat it, and get some sleep." The owner slowly turned away from him, heading for the cows he had allegedly been checking on just moments before. "Just finished a job, I presume... And you're selling yourself, aren't you?"

"...Yes, sir."

"Make sure you rest up, then."

"Yes, sir," he repeated as he watched the owner walk away. Then his nose twitched, and he caught the aroma of boiling milk from somewhere. The helmet turned again, and he began walking slowly toward the door of the house.

His feet still felt heavy.

§

She didn't ask any questions, just silently watched him eat his stew. She sat across from him, her hands on her cheeks

—but her expression was different from usual. Normally, she would smile happily, but today, strangely, her smile was missing.

After taking a few spoonfuls of stew, sucking them in through the visor of his helmet, he grunted quietly.

There was the hiss of the candlewick burning down. The canary chirped sleepily. In the distance, the cows lowed in displeasure. There was a gust of wind, and the night somehow felt deeper. It occurred to him to look out the window, where he discovered that the stars and moons had been hidden by clouds.

With a clack, he set his spoon on the table, considered, and then opened his mouth. “Is something...the matter?”

“You took the words right out of my mouth.” This was followed by an annoyed *humph*. She let out a breath as if—only as if, he thought—she was exasperated. Inside his helmet, he closed his eyes. She could divine no meaning from his mask or his visor. Sometimes they got in the way, sometimes pierced her heart, but...

Is that what's going on?

Because she was always *that way*, it was actually somewhat gratifying. Knowing she had seen through him, he felt silly for trying to put on. Who could blame her for being exasperated?

“It’s not work, is it?” she said. “So what is it? Did something happen to someone else?”

He opened his mouth, closed it again, then took in a breath and let it out. Beyond the slats of his visor, he could see her eyes, looking at him. Straight at him, as if she could see it all, but still she waited for him to speak.

At last he steeled himself and put things, however briefly, into his own words. “I’m lost.”

“Unusual for you.”

“Yes.”

What would his master say, if he were to hear this? Actually, he probably wouldn’t say anything, just laugh and

hit him. *Act!* That was his master's teaching. The moment you decided to do something and then followed through, victory was yours. If you do nothing, nothing happens. Whether or not you *can* do it is something else entirely, but whether or not you *will* do it is entirely up to you.

Of course, if you fail, people will laugh at you...

How many times did he make that point to me?

What was it he felt so uncertain about? He looked down at the half-empty bowl of soup so he would no longer have to meet her gaze. "There's something I want to help with."

"Yeah...?"

"But I don't know how to do it."

Speaking the words aloud brought it home to him. It was good to act. So what should the action be?

How simple goblin slaying was. Hack and slash. That's all there was to it. He knew what he had to do to accomplish it. He was always thinking about it. But...

That won't help me this time.

Lost as he was, it suddenly struck him: the reason why goblins only ever stole anything. All they needed to avoid resorting to thievery was to make things of their own. But how? Racking their brains to come up with a solution—that was terribly difficult.

And goblin slaying alone, at worst, would claim only his own life. When acting as the leader of a group, the lives of his friends (another soft grunt accompanied this thought) were riding on him, but solo, it was different.

In this case, though, everything was different. This was not about him. It was not about goblins. If he got it wrong, it was not he who would bear the consequences.

He had never once been under the illusion that he had become a master of all trades. There were a great many things he couldn't do. But to realize just how few cards he really held—it was unpleasant.

He registered all this, but still he was just a single, impotent man. No different from when he was hiding under

the floorboards...

"Mn, I wonder." Her words sneaked into his heart.

"..." He looked up from the bowl of soup, gazing at her as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

Her head was tilted to one side in concern, and she appeared to be thinking deeply, yet she was smiling. "I don't really get it, but this sounds tough."

"...I suspect."

"In that case..." Her voice seemed to draw a line, cheerful and clear. "Just be your usual self."

"My usual self."

"Yeah, every bit of you."

He was lost for words. She just smiled; it sounded so simple.

Perhaps—perhaps it really was as unremarkable as that. Was that how he always acted, from her point of view? He cast his mind's eye back on the boy under the floor ten years ago and nodded slowly.

"...Is that so?"

"Sure it is."

"Yes, I suppose it is..."

He picked up his spoon again.

What would his master say, if he were to hear this? Actually, he probably wouldn't say anything, just laugh and hit him.

He had been a poor disciple, not quick to learn lessons. Behind his helmet, his lips softened nearly into a smile.

Almost as if she could tell, she smiled even wider and quietly got up from her seat. "You want seconds?"

"Yes, please."

§

"See you later!"

"Yes" was Goblin Slayer's only response as he left the

farm.

Perhaps rain had fallen during the night, or perhaps it was just morning mist. The grass gleamed in the sun, and the sky was blue enough to hurt the eyes. Goblin Slayer looked through his visor at the sun and the white clouds, then set off slowly.

Today, strangely, she hadn't volunteered to go with him. "It's better that way, right?" she'd said, and he hadn't known how to respond. She probably knew better than he did. So he simply did as she said. Always, it seemed others understood better than him.

He followed the path along the fence, nodding his head when he spotted the owner far off with the cows. He didn't see whether there was a reaction. He was determined not to check.

He proceeded silently along the road, damp but drying quickly in the sun. Soon he found himself on the byway, then heading toward the frontier town, each part of the path bringing more and more people.

As a child, he had longed to walk this road ever since the first time he wished he could become an adventurer. Now, since registering with the Guild, he walked it virtually every day. Today he strolled along lost in thought, able to follow the road by memory. He slipped past one person after another, heading straight for the Guild. Before he pushed his way through the swinging door, he stopped and looked up at the building.

Had he ever really paused to take it in before?

It's been nearly seven years now, and yet—

"...Not going to go in?"

Goblin Slayer slowly turned to the source of the voice behind him. It was Guild Girl, standing and giggling almost in a shadow. In her arms, she protectively clutched a brand-new inkpot and quill pen among other small items.

"I promise I'm not late for work," she said when she saw him looking at her. "I was on a special errand. I guess the

lid didn't sit right on my inkpot, and all the ink dried up."

Goblin Slayer seemed to search the thin air for something to say before grunting softly. "No," he said, but it wasn't clear what he was denying. "I was only looking."

"Oh, okay. But don't you see it every day...?"

"Yes."

Hmm. Guild Girl held her purchases thoughtfully to her shapely chest. She looked up at Goblin Slayer, seeming to see straight through the visor. "I know the feeling—even if you see it every day, sometimes you just want to take a good, long look."

"Is that the case?"

"I should say so." Guild Girl nodded and smiled, although Goblin Slayer wasn't sure quite what was so funny.

"I see," Goblin Slayer said, glancing first at Guild Girl and then at the Guild. Nothing about the building had changed. Or rather, he couldn't remember how it had appeared the first time he had been here. He simply couldn't imagine it changing.

After another moment of staring at the building, he shook his head and turned back to Guild Girl. "Most likely," he said, then mulled over his words for a second, "today and tomorrow, I won't be able to go on goblin hunts."

"Goodness," Guild Girl said, pointedly widening her eyes a bit and acting surprised. "Are you taking a vacation?"

"I'm not, but..."

"...Hee-hee, I see how it is. What a fix I'm in..." *Gracious.* Guild Girl pasted a smile on her face, playing with the end of her braid as if unsure about something.

Goblin Slayer thought he should say something and opened his mouth. But nothing came out. At last he managed to squeeze out simply, "I see..."

It hardly meant anything, but Guild Girl giggled nonetheless. "It's all right." (Inside his helmet, Goblin Slayer blinked at her response.) "I'm not out to put the entire load on you alone, Goblin Slayer." *No need for*

concern! With that, Guild Girl puffed out her chest and added, "Don't worry about us!"

"I see," Goblin Slayer said, letting out a breath. "I will finish as quickly as I can."

"That's good. We can get by without you, but it's certainly nice to have your help." Guild Girl blushed slightly as she said this, then ran off with all the energy of a happy puppy. Just before pushing through the swinging door, she slowed. Her triple braid bobbed as she turned back to him. "Whatever you're doing, good luck! I'll be rooting for you!"

"Yes," Goblin Slayer replied, short, quiet, and dispassionate.

Guild Girl veritably danced through the door of the building. He watched her go, then he watched the door swing for a moment, and then he slowly began to walk forward. His usual bold stride, nonchalant, almost violent.

"That's what I'm sayin'! Charging in, stabbing first, and asking questions later, that's a kind of adventure, too!"

This exclamation was the first thing he heard as he walked through the door.

It was Spearman. He was over in a corner of the waiting area where adventurers of every type lounged and relaxed. On a bench in front of him were Scout Boy and Druid Girl, along with Rookie Warrior, Apprentice Cleric, and Harefolk Hunter.

Come to think of it, Goblin Slayer thought with a shake of his head, *perhaps they're no longer rookie nor apprentice.*

The young people were surrounded by longtime adventurers.

"No one's gonna think of you as a first-rate adventurer if you just sit around waiting for quests to come to you," Spearman said, sounding like a teacher delivering a lecture.

Beside him, the voluptuous witch he was always with, likewise sitting on the bench, opened her mouth. "That's, true," she said. She was virtually whispering, yet somehow,

the words reached even Goblin Slayer's ears. "How, exactly, does...an adventure start? That's something only...the gods know...no?"





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Hmm. The five young adventurers on the bench had already amassed a fair amount of experience, but this didn't quite seem to be making sense to them.

Scout Boy gave them a blank look. "Are you sure about that?"

Female Knight crossed her arms in front of her armored chest and nodded sagely. "I think she's right. Nobody knows where you'll find the seed of the adventure that might save the world. Be it omens of the Dark Gods' revival, gates to other planes, or the Hellmouth itself, you can't survive if you don't know how to see what's around you."

"Listen to her." Heavy Warrior rested his chin in his hands with an aggravated look but showed no sign of talking back. Probably, he felt that in some way, she was speaking the truth. "Let me clarify," he said, seeing that the boys and girls were not quite able to imagine an adventure that could save the world. "Say you're on a monster-hunting quest, and deep in their cave, you discover ruins that go even deeper. You'd check 'em out, right?"

"Sure, of course we would," Druid Girl said, clapping her little rhea hands and nodding. This, she understood. "That might be where the monsters are coming from, and anyway, unknown ruins might just be packed with valuable treasure."

"Yes, but." Half-Elf Light Warrior entered the conversation with an elegant gesture. *"Some* preparation would be needed. To go rushing in without a second thought would be to invite death."

"Yeah, gotta be careful." Female Knight puffed out her cheeks in annoyance, and Heavy Warrior managed to keep himself to just a smile.

"Which is all a long way of saying, *I think we better go to the water town.* They've got that temple there—and this lady *is* a follower of the Supreme God." Heavy Warrior let a little laugh slip out of his mouth as he gave the pouting knight a friendly pat on the head. "We have a kind of

sidelong connection to the Temple of the Earth Mother, too. Gotta use those connections if we want to find out what's going on with these rumors."

"Hmm... Wonder what I should do..." Spearman frowned, adding something under his breath about being bad at "city adventures." Thinking back on it, he should have paid more attention to that Bronze adventurer he'd met in his first year. The tricks for dealing with that Rock Eater would definitely have come in handy.

"I know a guy who's at the water town right now, an adventurer. Guess I can at least go with you that far."

Witch responded to this thoughtful mumble of Spearman's with a "That's, true" and a lovely nod. "This... looks, like...it could turn out to be...big." She produced a smoking pipe from her ample bosom, lighting the end of it with a spell. A small shower of magical sparks was followed by Witch inhaling a lazy puff of aromatic smoke. "It never... hurts, to have...more options."

"Yeah, but—"

"Hey—"

Rookie Warrior and Apprentice Cleric, who had been listening silently, looked at each other and nodded.

"I remember the year before last, when that farm was attacked—you said she wouldn't help if it wasn't a quest."

"Hufh," Harefolk Hunter said, her cheeks full of barley porridge. "I don't know about these rumors or whatever, but—" She twitched her ears and swallowed. "...What'cher sayin' is, he's a good guy after all."

"Aw, stuff it! It's just a man's duty to help a beautiful woman in distress!" Spearman was most vehement, but the boys and girls were already giggling and gabbing together. Heavy Warrior, Female Knight, and Half-Elf Light Warrior watched them in amusement for a moment before wading in to stop them. And then Witch, with a giggle, turned to *him*.

"..." Goblin Slayer could say nothing; he just stood in one

place and watched. It wasn't hesitation or even disengagement. He himself wasn't sure what he should say.

"Heh-heh!" The laughter was lovely to listen to, like the chirping of a bird. There she was, sitting on the bench usually occupied by Goblin Slayer himself. "That's adventurers for you." High Elf Archer twitched her ears pointedly and grinned at him. Beside her was Dwarf Shaman, chin in his hands, wearing an expression that said he had no choice. Lizard Priest was standing by the wall with a knowing look on his face.

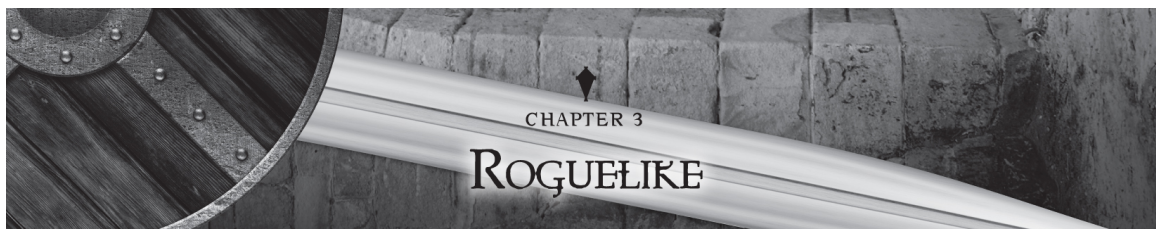
And then there was Priestess, surrounded by them, looking a bit overwhelmed. But then she glanced up and saw him. Her face blossomed into a smile. "Goblin Slayer, sir, um...!"

He shook his head slowly from side to side. Behind his visor, they detected a slight softening of his lips.

It was always like this. Just as his master had said, he was not very bright. As ever, other people seemed to understand what was going on better than he did. That was just the way it was.

"Yes," he said. "I'm going now."

And then Goblin Slayer began to walk over toward his friends and companions. Compared with that long road home, his footsteps felt easy and light.



She wondered why, when she had been asked, “Are you coming?” she had instantly responded, “I am!” Now, walking down a dim, funny-smelling side street, Priestess felt the slightest twinge of regret.

Walking ahead of her was a silent, inelegant suit of armor. Although he was kind enough to match her stride, Priestess still somehow found herself jogging to keep up. She clutched her sounding staff in front of her chest, where her heart pounded relentlessly.

She had lived in this town for years now, yet she had never even imagined that it contained a place like this. Slums, one might call them. Although the frontier town was a sort of pioneer outpost, it used the infrastructure of a town that had already been there. Now Priestess goggled at the profusion of dilapidated buildings around her. She had never in her life ventured into the disorderly sprawl that spread out from the edge of town.

She was, of course, a cleric of the Earth Mother. She felt no repulsion for those who sat on the ground, staring vacantly, or mumbled to themselves, hugging their rags around them. True, she sometimes felt uncomfortable around them, she would have to admit, but if one of them had asked her for help, she would have helped.

Then, too, she had shed some of the naïveté that might once have compelled her to reach out to every last unfortunate person they passed. But still...

I can't help wondering if I should really have come with him.

She picked up her pace again to catch up with that

armored back, which had gotten ahead of her while she was thinking.

"Want me to come with you?" High Elf Archer had asked back at the Adventurers Guild.

"I'm going to find help," he had said. *"You all should stay and guard the temple."*

They still didn't know what their enemies—if there were enemies—wanted or how they would act. They had to be prepared.

I see, she realized, reflecting on the recent adventure. It was always possible that those dead creatures or goblins or whatever they were might target the Temple of the Earth Mother. That was why Goblin Slayer was taking the time and effort to respond to this situation. That by itself set her heart pounding—on reflection, she thought maybe that was the reason. The reason when he had said "Are you coming?"—not asking for her opinion or giving her any information—she had responded, "I am!"

Then—she thought; she didn't remember so clearly—she had told High Elf Archer something about being worried about her home temple. It wasn't much of an excuse, and she had the distinct impression the others had seen right through her.

Urrgh... Just thinking about it was enough to make her face burn with shame. *And here I'm supposed to be seventeen already.*

It was very dispiriting for Priestess to be confronted with her own childishness.

Many adventurers were going into action. And (setting aside her acute self-awareness) they were doing it for the sake of the Temple of the Earth Mother—for her family. It seemed, somehow, really...grown-up, she thought. Much, much more than she was.

When she spoke, she tried hard not to let these thoughts into her voice. "S-say, uh, Goblin Slayer, sir..."

"What is it?"

"You talked about h-helpers... Do you *know* someone around here?"

The idea surprised her very much. Yet, at the same time, it seemed completely reasonable. She had been with him for no small amount of time now. As he went on his way from farm to Guild to cave and back again, he would naturally make acquaintances all throughout the town. Despite how he looked, she had often seen him conversing easily with people he didn't know.

He was a veteran now. It was really only natural that he should know people everywhere.

It's been three years, and yet...

And yet she hadn't yet discovered everything about him. The thought made Priestess a bit sad, yet at the same time, happy. Like a book she was thrilled to read and which still had many pages left.

"Someone I know, yes. But not someone with whom I'm acquainted," he said after one of those soft grunts. Priestess's head began to fill with question marks.

"What does that mean...?"

"Come with me, and you'll find out."

Well, what could Priestess say to that?

Goblin Slayer walked through the slums looking this way and that, as if searching for something. Priestess followed him with all the sweetness—and all the struggle—of a little bird but with no idea what he was seeking.

Perhaps he sensed her intensity, because after a while he said in his usual dispassionate tone, "A sign." The words were blunt. "One my teacher taught me."

"A sign..."

"They leave their mark. On doorways."

"Uh...huh."

At last, he stopped in front of one particular building. A small structure, standing smack on the edge of town...

"A general store...?" Priestess asked, looking at the sign that hung on some chains above them. Was this the sign he

had meant? No, it couldn't be; Goblin Slayer had said something about doorways. "Hmm," she said, putting her finger to her lips as she let her eyes wander the scene.

Looking for anything that might fit the description, she noticed a tiny scratch on one corner of the door. It almost looked as if it had been inscribed with chalk, but it didn't strike her as anything unique or special.

"We're going in."

"Oh, r-right!"

While Priestess stood there trying to figure it all out, *he* pushed open the door and entered; she followed him in a rush.

It's dark. And cramped.

Those were her first impressions. A rusty lamp burned although it was daytime, roasting the little bugs that flocked to it. The greasy orange light it produced made the shadows of the room seem to dance. Priestess blinked, feeling a wave of something like dizziness.

There were ceiling-high shelves on all four sides, lined with an assortment of items boasting a patina of dust. It was obvious at a glance that stock wasn't moving, that times were hard. This was a general store that was on its last legs.

"U-um, Goblin Slayer, sir...?" Priestess whispered.

"...And what might y'be looking for, my dear customer?"

Priestess froze with a surprised "Eep!" A diminutive, sleepy-eyed man was sitting in a corner of the shop, almost buried by his stock. When had he arrived—or had he been there all along? Priestess didn't even know that. Maybe he was a rhea, or a dwarf... No, she couldn't rule out the possibility that he might be a human. Priestess could tell that he was a man, but his age and race were completely opaque to her.

Maybe it was the way that his kerchief—a faded gray thing that looked like a fox—hid his face.

"A brass lantern," Goblin Slayer responded, sounding like

he was reciting by rote. "And oil."

"You must be an adventurer, good sir."

Huh? Priestess's eyes widened slightly. She thought she detected a slight change in the shopkeeper's annoyed tone. Maybe that was her accumulated experience talking, or maybe...

"Might I ask what y've got in mind to do next?" And two searching eyes peered out at them from just under the kerchief. The gaze was piercing. Without really meaning to, Priestess held her staff in front of her as if trying to hide behind it.

Goblin Slayer merely nodded. "I'm going to slay the serpent."

"...And may y'have good luck doing it."

Then the shopkeeper moved, swaying gently, almost sliding along. Priestess made another sound of surprise.

Was that magic? The wall behind the shopkeeper had disappeared. The yawning space revealed a heavy, glittering door that seemed completely out of place in the claustrophobic shop.

"Heh," the shopkeeper said when he saw Priestess's expression. She thought it made him sound like a rhea. But that passing impression was quickly wiped away.

"Welcome, young lady and sir slayer of goblins, to the Guild of Rogues."

§

"Ain't like we're puttin' up recruitment posters for the scum of the earth, but it just sounds more proper when you call yourselves a guild. Far as it goes, we're no different from your Adventurers Guild that way." The shopkeeper snickered quietly as he led the two of them down the narrow passageway. Did this entire space really exist behind that tiny shop? Priestess was at a loss.

There was something else that left her flummoxed, too: this shopkeeper. She could easily take him for a rhea—but also for an elf, a dwarf, or a human. Sometimes she thought there might be beast ears under that gray kerchief or that she caught a glimpse of a lizardman's scales beneath his shirt.

It must be the magic, Priestess thought yet again. But she sensed it wasn't something she should ask about. Some things in this world were better left obscure. And she had so many other questions.

"Just like the Adventurers Guild...? With quests and everything...?" she asked hesitantly. She had been speaking to Goblin Slayer beside her, but it was the shopkeeper who answered.

"Well, johnsons talk to fixers who find runners for them; they have that much in common." The way the shopkeeper slid forward, the only footsteps that echoed in the hall were hers and Goblin Slayer's. And for that matter, despite his bold stride, Goblin Slayer's steps were remarkably soft. Priestess found herself cringing with embarrassment with every clack of her boots and jangle of her sounding staff. "But then, we're also home to those who don't feel as they can trust the Adventurers Guild."

"Can't trust us?" The brusque question came, unexpectedly, from Goblin Slayer.

"Mmm," the shopkeeper said with a cackle. "A matter of...credit, y'might say."

"*Hmm,*" Goblin Slayer grunted.

"Gotta get the facts; that's just proper etiquette. You let yourself get duped, it's yer own fault."

"I see."

"Tell you the first problem with runners who come crying about someone done wrong by 'em—they look ridiculous! Begging for someone else t'wipe their asses for them..." The shopkeeper sounded dead serious, snorting as if with contempt for the whole idea. "I know it only makes me

sound old t'gripe about 'young people these days,' but I tell you, all they do is complain."

It was probably, Priestess thought absently, a question of how they lived their lives.

She had heard the rumors. Whispers of those who ran through the shadows of the great cities, working underground. Practitioners of a trade in which there was no one to protect you, nothing to count on but your own wits and skill. It was terrifying, the freedom these people enjoyed, and maybe that was why others questioned the way they lived.

Priestess shivered at the sheer uncertainty and precariousness of it all. For her, first the Temple of the Earth Mother and now the Adventurers Guild had been something of a shield. To willingly go where those things didn't exist and counted for nothing was more than she could imagine.

"Course, we don't go out of our way to work with backstabbers..." The shopkeeper seemed to have noticed her shaking and was apparently trying to reassure her. "For one thing, we're still grateful to the good sir for the service he rendered us at the harvest festival two years ago. Far be it from us to do him any injustice."

"Oh..." Priestess had never been more grateful to be hidden by the dark. She couldn't think of who this man in the gray kerchief might be—understandably, considering she couldn't see his face—but now she thought perhaps he had seen her dancing with her sounding staff at the harvest festival.

"I remember that night," Goblin Slayer murmured, but Priestess had something on her mind besides what had happened to Goblin Slayer during the festival. She gave thanks again for the gloom that hid her flushed face.

The shopkeeper hardly seemed to notice her reaction as he pushed open a door at the end of the tunnel. Suddenly, Priestess had to squint against the light that flooded in from

the other side. It burned her eyes, accustomed as they'd become to the dark.

"...A tavern," Goblin Slayer finally said.

"One that hasn't opened for th'day yet, but yes."

In between blinks, Priestess could see Goblin Slayer and the shopkeeper conversing normally.

"Can you see...?" The question was out before she knew it, the same question she had asked long ago.

Goblin Slayer grunted softly. But this time, he added some advice. "Whenever you enter a dark space, close one eye. If it isn't for too long, you'll be able to adapt."

"Y-yes, sir..."

Priestess's eyes, meanwhile, had finally begun to adjust, and now she could make out the space she was in. The only taverns she had known were the one at the Guild and others scattered around town. This one, by contrast, seemed—gloomy.

Or...quiet?

Her reaction might have been different had they come at night, but they were there in the middle of the day. The neatly kept establishment was a small space with a handful of seats, plus spots at the counter. A thought flitted through her mind: *Perhaps this used to be an armory.*

Behind the counter, wearing a black vest and bow tie, a beautiful woman stood polishing a glass. The faint sound of water alerted Priestess that this barmaid was a "maid" in more than one sense—her lower half was submerged in a water barrel. The merfolk barmaid smiled when she noticed Priestess looking at her, and Priestess blushed afresh and looked away.

This left her looking at some black-haired padfoots, both catlike and doglike ones, playing stringed instruments. Come nightfall, the troubadours would ply their trades, the wine would flow freely, and runners would discuss runs in the tavern. It was a world beyond Priestess's imagination.

"Speakeasy?" asked Goblin Slayer.

“Call it an aesthetic choice. Not t’say we don’t do under-the-table deals when they’re called for.”

The shopkeeper climbed onto one of the barstools, and Goblin Slayer sat down beside him. The chair squeaked in protest under the weight of his armor, but the sound prompted Priestess to hurry over and sit down as well.

Before she could say anything, the barmaid noiselessly slid a glass down to Priestess. She wondered if it might be an alcoholic drink, but instead she found a generous portion of fresh milk, and she hesitantly picked it up. At the same time, the padfoots in the corner struck up a tune. The sound, somewhere between a horn and a recorder, was new to her, but she found it pleasant to her ears.

“Your hospitality is most scrupulous,” Goblin Slayer said softly. There was a drink in his hand as well. A thin barley beer, perhaps. It seemed unlikely they would press strong alcohol on someone who had come to talk business.

“Heh-heh,” the shopkeeper chuckled bashfully. “Now, then...”

“Mm,” Goblin Slayer said shortly and nodded.

The conversation that followed was enough to leave Priestess’s head spinning.

“Now, good sir, why not take it easy? Enjoy yourself.”

“Thank you, I will. Since you’ve offered me a chair and a cup, I shall introduce myself. Please relax.”

“I ’preciate your introducing yourself. But surely you don’t need that mask of yours—please, relax.”

“As you can see, this is crucial to my profession—please don’t worry about it.”

“No, no, I must insist y’re relax.”

“No, *you* relax.”

“Well, if y’insist, then I will, gratefully. Hope you don’t mind my relaxin’ first.”

“You must excuse my uncivilized appearance. I come from a pioneer town on the western frontier; my master was he who rides on barrels, and my profession is the

slaying of goblins.”

“Thank ya, thank ya. I must apologize for the boss bein’ away on your first visit, but you’ll have to make do with myself, a foxish type with a gray kerchief.”

“Thank you for accepting my introduction. Please, raise your head.”

“Of course, dear sir, but raise *your* head first.”

“That would be problematic.”

“At the same time, then.”

“That is acceptable.”

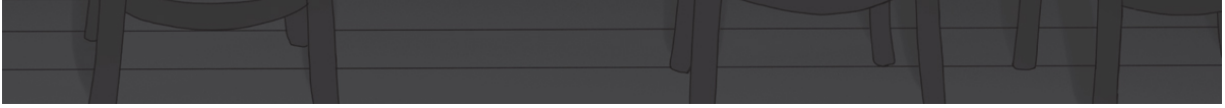
“The request is humbly made, then.”

The exchange, an almost ritualistic introduction of themselves and their backgrounds, was over in the space of a long breath. Priestess could only catch snatches of it, and those sounded to her like incantations or spells. As the two of them finished speaking, they raised their bowed heads at almost the same instant, each letting out a breath.

She hardly understood one thing that had just happened, but it seemed to be something the two of them needed. The gray-kerchiefed shopkeeper grinned, baring his teeth, and said lightly, “Well, my good sir. What is it you wish?”

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“Information.” Goblin Slayer’s reply could not have been more brusque. “A wine merchant, the water town. I want to know what he’s been doing lately.”

“Wha—?” Priestess nearly dropped the glass from which she had been about to take a delicate sip. This person he mentioned—he wasn’t totally irrelevant to what was happening, but still. Priestess blinked, grunted softly almost the way *he* did, but then tilted her head when she received no response.

“...What’s his connection to you?”

“I don’t know,” Goblin Slayer replied, another brusque answer. “That’s why I’m investigating... Or having him investigated. And then I’ll make my move.”

“Aha,” the shopkeeper said, stroking his chin in what might have been admiration. “I see now...” And then he circled one of his short, fat fingers in the air, like a spider weaving thread. “And how much, for this information?”

“How much do you want?”

Priestess let out a breath. *Huh, I should have known he wouldn’t bother negotiating.*

That was when the eyes below the kerchief squinted. The voice got low, like a dagger held in the hand. “Y’mean t’slap our face with money?”

“That’s right,” Goblin Slayer replied, as though nothing were unusual. “This is an important request. If it’s too much for you, fine.”

“Yer suggestin’ we can’t handle it?”

“Can you?”

A pair of appraising eyes stared from under the gray kerchief, into the cheap-looking metal helmet. Priestess discovered she had been clinging tighter and tighter to her sounding staff without realizing it, out of a subconscious recognition that something—she didn’t know what—was about to happen. It wasn’t caution, of course, that caused her to clutch her staff, or the desire to be able to react instantly—it was simple fear.

This was not the kind of adventure she was used to, the kind that took place out in the field. This was urban adventuring, city adventuring. A situation she knew absolutely nothing about, she realized belatedly. She'd thought she had learned a thing or two in the past two years, and now—this.

“...”

The air was tense, and Priestess realized she could no longer hear the strains of music from the corner. She swallowed heavily, feeling like the sound must be audible all over the bar; she could hardly take a breath.

She had no idea how much time had passed—probably less than she thought—when the shopkeeper held up three fingers. Goblin Slayer, seeing it, nonchalantly dug through his item bag, produced four small pouches of gold coins, and slid them over. They jingled as they ran along the countertop.

At length, the shopkeeper let out a breath. “...Yer not much of a negotiator, good sir. There's a fine line between bein' generous and bein' a mark.”

“You and I are neither friends nor companions,” Goblin Slayer said softly, a breath rasping out from beneath his helmet. “But I'm asking you to do that which I cannot. It's only fair that you have your price for it.”

The shopkeeper in his gray kerchief studied the cheap-looking helmet with a mixture of seriousness and exasperation. Finally he said, “All these years and not a peep from ya—I thought you'd washed your hands of us. Then finally y'show up, and this is what y'do... I swear, only our dear Burglar could produce a student like you.”

Was that annoyance or admiration Priestess detected in the whisper? She wasn't sure. Then again, the words—and the way he said them—sounded much like the way she herself often spoke of Goblin Slayer.

The shopkeeper slowly shook his head from side to side, grabbed the little pouches, and stuffed them in a bag. Then

his gaze turned to her. “Best pay close attention, young lady. He may not look like much, but he’s an adventurer of Silver rank. Gonna be a right help to you very soon, he is.”

For the first time since she had arrived, Priestess’s expression softened, and she giggled. Yes, she said, she knew that.

“Good, good,” the man in the gray kerchief replied, patting his chest, which now bulged with coins. “A request from this master here, we’ll try our best to accommodate.”

Goblin Slayer also did something for the first time since they had arrived—he shifted uncomfortably. “...Don’t call me master.”

From the sound of his voice alone, Priestess knew.

He was embarrassed.

§

“Phew...”

Outside, the sky was as clear and blue as when you wake up from a dream or burst through the surface of the water. Priestess found herself making a sound of relief and taking grateful gulps of air. It had been so suffocating inside, almost literally—not just the space but the conversation. She knew fervently that such a place was not her territory. It wasn’t repulsion she felt but alienation. It was not a place she belonged—a truth she comprehended completely, even if not rationally.

“What... What was that place?” She looked back and saw nothing but a cozy general store. That was all. But it would never look the same to her again.

“A gathering place for runners. Underground adventurers.” Goblin Slayer’s words were disinterested, mercilessly brief. He did not look back but only went ahead at his bold stride, leaving Priestess to rush to catch up with him.

"Underground...", she gasped. "You mean, they haven't registered with the Guild?"

"Yes."

Priestess really didn't understand any of this. That meant they went without the proof of identity offered by the Adventurers Guild, without the guarantees about quests, with nothing. Nothing except themselves—a precarious position indeed.

"That's why they use those signs and rituals—to verify who you are and to protect themselves." He still sounded dispassionate, but he seemed to have read her mind.

To live in complete freedom, unattached to anything, was also to be completely unprotected from anything. The right to simply drift along meant the obligation to accept that you might die in the wilderness with no one to find you. Perhaps that was what made one a no-goodnik, a rogue.

"All it means is that places like this do exist, and some people do live this way." Goblin Slayer stopped in front of Priestess, who had gone tense as if from fear. His words were as dispassionate as ever, and yet...

It isn't a place he comes willingly.

That, Priestess thought, was what he was really saying.

"Goblin slaying," he said, and then he fell silent for a moment. "Goblin slaying alone is not adventure."

"Yes, sir" was all Priestess could manage.

She thought she understood, distantly, why he had never come to this place until now. They walked a little farther, until Priestess finally and truly felt she had gotten some distance from the general store, and then she stole a glance backward. She took a breath as she looked at the building looming in the distance.

"Do you think...those are good people there? Or...bad people?"

"They take money. Sometimes they do good things for it, sometimes bad. That's how it is."

Priestess found that, still, this way of life seemed

incomprehensibly foreign to her.

"*I see.*" She wasn't sure if the small whisper reached him where his back was turned to her. He had started walking again, stride, stride, and she jogged to catch up.

"So next, we...?"

"Gather evidence. That's what the man said, and that's what we're going to do."

"Evidence...?"

"Yes," Goblin Slayer said, but then he let out a breath. It almost sounded like he had laughed, ever so quietly. "It's only something I learned from my master. I never had anything to do with them."

"Yes, sir!" Priestess nodded. She felt as if the weight on her heart had lifted a little.

§

"Guess my talk was too hasty."

I thought gathering information meant we were going to be visiting another dirty back alley. Not this place...

Priestess fidgeted, the sheer surprise making her uncomfortable.

The room was thoroughly organized and clean. The table was free of dust or food. Priestess was seated squarely on one of the chairs.

They had left the frontier town and traveled down the road a ways, between the stone wall and the fence, through the pastures full of grass. To the farm, the farm where Goblin Slayer lived.

"Is that so?"

"It is, it is..."

Goblin Slayer, seated beside her, was conversing with a middle-aged man across from him, the owner of the farm.

Of course, it wasn't that Priestess had never met this person. She had spoken to him before and had even had

reason to visit this farm. That first spring battle after she became an adventurer—even now it remained vividly in her memory. So this man was not a complete stranger, but she had never sat down with him for a conversation like this.

Urrgh...

Her gaze shifted uneasily, eventually meeting that of Cow Girl, who was also at the table. Cow Girl had been surprised to see *him* come back in the middle of the day and had been even more surprised to see Priestess with him. The third surprise was when he'd said he had something to discuss with the owner; she had gone to the main house, indicating that she would make tea.

And so she had, and she poured it into a teacup, which now sat before Priestess. She brought the steaming cup to her lips and let out a breath. It was strange: It tasted somehow like the tea Guild Girl offered them at the Guild.

Maybe she uses the same leaves.

It was just a passing thought for Priestess, but as it crossed her mind, she noticed Cow Girl chuckling. *He's seriously hopeless, isn't he?* she seemed to be saying, and that made Priestess feel even more relaxed, and she began to smile.

"So his suggestion...was that you get rid of the pastureland and turn it into fields?"

"In so many words, yes. Tear up that old fence and that stone wall, he said. Build something new, he said." The owner looked like he was about to explode. He didn't appear to wonder why Goblin Slayer was asking about this. Perhaps it just seemed normal to him... Or did it? Priestess didn't know. "The price he offered wasn't bad. And I'm not a young man anymore. If I don't hire some help, I don't see how this farm can go on forever." *So eventually I'll have to change things* was what he seemed to be saying. He frowned. "But I *am* an old man. Set in my ways. To do something completely new now—I don't have the heart for it."

"I see," Goblin Slayer said obligingly and glanced out the window. Or more precisely, Priestess *thought* he did; she could never tell exactly where he was looking thanks to his helmet. She followed his gaze (or assumed she did), which took in the spreading pasture, the cows contentedly munching on the grass. It was by no means a large farm, but it was a well-kept piece of land, a place to be proud of, she thought.

Goblin Slayer seemed to feel the same, for when he spoke again, he still sounded thoughtful and polite. "And it would take a good deal of help to convert this land to fields anyway."

"I admit, some of it's that I personally don't like the idea. The merchant said he would find people to do all the work."

The owner could just take the money, take the help, obediently turned his pastures to fields, and live out his life. Yes, yes, that could be a very easy existence indeed. He would have so many hired hands, he wouldn't even have to work himself. He could simply sit and enjoy his dotage.

"But I tell you," he said, "I may not look like much, but I'm a yeoman, a freeholder." A touch of self-admonition entered his voice. It was he who had protected this land, he who had cultivated this land—it was his land. Whether he hired helpers or turned the whole place to crop fields, it was he who would make the decisions for his land.

"..." Under his helmet, Goblin Slayer took a breath in, then let it out. "I believe you."

It was just those three words, but his answer seemed to satisfy the owner, who nodded slowly. Then, his face still stern, he said, "The old dog even said he had a marriage proposal for you..."

"What?" someone said, accompanied by the clattering of a teacup—was it Priestess or Cow Girl? Cow Girl, at the very least, stood up from her chair. Her eyes were open wide, and her voice prickled with what might have been bewilderment, or confusion, or even simple pique. "What

the hell? I didn't hear anything about that."

"Because I turned him down," her uncle said flatly. He picked up his cup of dark tea and took a sip. "We aren't nobility, here. We don't think about each other in terms of what would be best for business."

Maybe that wasn't what Cow Girl had wanted to hear. Still red in the face, she swung her arms aimlessly, making a sort of moaning sound. Priestess, now very uncomfortable, kept her eyes down but managed to sneak a glance at him. She couldn't see his expression—what was he thinking? How did he feel about this?

"..." Goblin Slayer grunted softly, then fell into a sullen silence. She hadn't seen him pick up the cup in front of him, but she noticed that it was empty.

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"Goblin Slayer, sir...?"

"Yes."

It was the shortest of answers. Dispassionate, calm—the way he sounded when he was focusing his attention on something. There was a clatter as he pushed back his chair and got up with a nonchalant motion.

"I'm going to go gather my thoughts," he said to Cow Girl. "May I leave her with you?"

"Huh? Oh..." Cow Girl was caught off guard, but she nodded. "Yeah, I...I don't mind."

"Pardon." Goblin Slayer dipped his head. Priestess wanted to say something, but she couldn't form the words, and in the end, she stayed silent. As for *him*, he swept the room with another motion of his helmet, then turned once more to the owner of the farm. "Thank you. You've been a help to me."

"That so...?" His tone was ambiguous, admitting no exact emotion as he set his cup on the table. "Be glad if it were..."

"Yes, sir... This has been informative. Very." And with that, Goblin Slayer strode boldly out of the room without so much as a backward glance. He opened the door of the main house, then shut it noisily.

"....."

"Ha-ha..."

Priestess and Cow Girl looked at the door, then at each other, and then they both shrugged, sharing a tired expression.

§

Their target is the farm, Goblin Slayer concluded, but then he quickly shook his head. And most likely, it's just a means to an end.

The wind rustled through the grass at his feet, then blew past the stone wall and down the road. Goblin Slayer

turned his head, watching it go, then looked up at the sky. He could see birds flying through the brilliant blue, high above. He squinted against the light that came in through his visor.

Everything seemed to swirl around him, to pull him in and draw him after it. He had never found his current situation disagreeable. How could he? It was just...

Fighting goblins in the confines of a cave was simpler. He found himself having the thought more frequently. Maybe, in the end, he really wasn't cut out for this.

He sniffed at that superficial idea. Everything was a matter of do or do not do— *Can* or *cannot* had no part in this. That was all.

He fought to retain his typical vigilance as he started out toward the pasture and a nonchalant stride. As he walked along, lost in thought, the cows wandered over to the familiar armored figure. Giving them each a pat on the nose, he found a decent spot and sat down. Just mulling the whole problem over wasn't getting anywhere, so it was time to organize what he knew. Goblin Slayer picked up a convenient stick and began scratching in the dirt.

They were after the farm. Why was that?

He drew a line, then a circle at the end of it, and then added a smaller circle beside that one. He drew the town and the byway, the farm, and then lines representing the stone wall and the fence, as best he could remember them all.

Destroy the fence, dismantle the stone wall, flatten the pastures—it would leave the farm naked. But to what end?

Their target is the farm.

Of that much, at least, he was sure. It was clear that this was some kind of stratagem for that purpose. Perhaps it seemed a little paranoid, but sometimes one needed a little paranoia. Many a rogue could have told you how an excess of caution had saved their lives.

But Goblin Slayer grunted softly. He couldn't elaborate

his diagram any further.

It wouldn't end if he protected the farm. It wouldn't end if he killed the goblins. It wouldn't even end if he destroyed the nest.

Adventuring is...quite difficult.

"Well, if it isn't Goblin Slayer. Having a nice little conversation with yourself?"

The cool, clear voice came at him from over his head. *Hrk*, he grunted and looked up to discover the dauntless grin of Female Knight. Behind her was Heavy Warrior, looking put out, along with their other party members, Scout Boy, Druid Girl, and Half-Elf Light Warrior. That had to mean...

"An adventure?"

"Er, nah, just heading to the water town. The others'll meet us, and we'll all link up."

Goblin Slayer searched his recollections and concluded that "the others" must be Spearman and Witch.

"So what's got you so worked up anyway? Hey...what's this?"

"A map," he said as Female Knight craned her neck to see. He poked one of the small circles with the stick in his hand. "I don't understand why the enemy would attack here," he grunted. "Even though it has happened before."

"Well, obviously, because it's a branch castle." She said it like it was so simple. Female Knight puffed out her armor-covered chest proudly, as if to say, *You don't even know that?*

"A branch castle."

"Uh-huh. They're sometimes called supporting castles, but the point is, it's a fortification that helps protect the main castle. Sometimes they'll build simple ones during castle sieges."

"Hmm." Goblin Slayer made a sound of gratitude for this perspective from an unlooked-for place. *Branch castle*—it was a fascinating term. An expression from a field he knew

nothing of. He focused his concentration.

Female Knight, however, didn't appear to notice as she continued to expound. "You can't just ignore the branch and attack the main fortifications. But at the same time, when you try to attack the supporting castle, you find yourself under siege from the main castle, too."

"A dangerous proposition."

"Mm." Female Knight nodded. "So a lot of strategies account for the best way to get rid of any supporting bastions."

For example, you might offer peace in exchange for the dismantling of branch castles...

She spoke fluently of military engagements, of stories drawn from actual battles—the sorts of things a knight might be expected to know. He did not know anything about her past, but an itinerant knight or knight errant was still a knight.

"I see" was all Goblin Slayer said as he nodded and tried to force all this into his head. He didn't have the intelligence to remember it all at once. But he could always make the effort to try to remember.

"...Naw, I know what this is—it's a map of this farm, ain't it?"

"Hrgh?!" Female Knight almost choked as she found her lecture interrupted by Heavy Warrior, peering over her shoulder. She fixed him with a glare as she said, still imperiously, "Wha—? But— Hey! What I said made sense, didn't it?! It made *so* much sense!"

"Listen, don't get excited..."

"No," Goblin Slayer said. He felt sincere respect, and he endeavored to take a polite tone. "It's a fact... This was helpful. I appreciate it."

"There, see!" Female Knight sniffed victoriously at this show of support, while Heavy Warrior only sighed. He appeared to feel that this was an ongoing problem with knights—or perhaps with this particular knight.

Goblin Slayer regarded the two of them and their party, and then—maybe he felt it was the right thing to do—bowed his head. “Pardon me. I didn’t mean to take your time while you were getting on your way.”

“Aw, don’t mention it.” Heavy Warrior waved a gloved hand and grinned. “Trying to save time by acting like you don’t have any, that’s when you lose the most of all.”

“Is that the case?”

“Sure is. Depending on the time and the situation, ‘course.”

“I see.”

And then, after this brief conversation, Heavy Warrior and his party set out on the road once again.

The journey to the water town. The number of days it would take to go there and back again. What would be done there—Goblin Slayer thought about all of it.

What should he do? How should he act?

Heavy Warrior had said once—when was it?—that he wished he were king. Indeed, Goblin Slayer could see now what a difficult position that would be. It was not something that could be handled simply by destroying the goblins in front of you. You had to see more, know more, think more, and make firm decisions.

“...Adventuring is hard.” As Goblin Slayer strode away at his bold pace, he thought about what was in his pocket.

His hand was there. Always. And with his hand, he could enact a plan.

At the moment, most of his plans were not very adventurer-ish.

So what should he do?

Be roguelike—that was the answer.



The burbling of the brook was tremendously comforting in this gloomy world. It was hard to resist the temptation to take a little nap, although there certainly wasn't time on this task. The temptation was all the stronger because this was her own turf, the sun-speckled courtyard deep in the Temple of the Supreme God. It wasn't as if working from dawn till dusk would actually make one more capable. And her attendants were always nagging at her to get more rest.

Surely the world wouldn't end if she took an hour or two of sleep...

Hmph. That's just a convenient excuse, and I know it.

Sword Maiden gently pulled the sword-and-scales over to her where she had been basking in the warmth of the afternoon sunlight. She heard footsteps coming down the corridor. Familiar footsteps—but something strange accompanied them in the distance. A rattling of armor. The sound was one of disharmony. Confusion. A mix of races and genders.

"Tell me, have some adventurers come...?"

"Ah, y-yes, ma'am..."

Without looking up, Sword Maiden could tell Female Merchant had frozen with a start at the entrance to the garden. Normally Sword Maiden made an effort to "look" at people, but she was feeling rather lazy at present.

"They say they wish to meet with you, Lady Archbishop. I've asked them to wait for the moment..."

"Hmm." There was a hush as she rose, bracing herself against the sword-and-scales, provoking a reverberant

jangle from the latter. "And how, may I ask, was the capital?"

"The same as always, I suppose." Female Merchant (Sword Maiden perceived) smiled with a touch of bitterness. "His Majesty exercises himself over matters of governance, but still there's no end to the plotting of the noble houses and the powerful merchants, or the scheming of the evil sects..."

"Which is simply to say the world never lacks for seeds of adventure."

"...Yes, ma'am."

Sword Maiden chuckled; in contrast, Female Merchant looked somberly at the ground.

I understand that's a good thing, but just the same, Sword Maiden thought.

Female Merchant had endured awful experiences, seen too much, and yet even still, she had not lost her fastidiousness. Sword Maiden saw all that as very much a joyous thing, but no doubt it often pained Female Merchant herself. Sword Maiden should know—she was the same. She had delved the deepest dungeon, and between that and the many adventures afterward, she had seen much...

"This town is just the same way," she whispered, as if instructing a wavering disciple.

She took a step toward Female Merchant, closing the space between them and reaching out a hand to touch her cheek, hearing the trembling "Oh" that came in response. The skin was like silk beneath her fingers. Sword Maiden smiled at the gentle heat it radiated. "There are always those who run, hiding from the sun, through the shadows. It's simply the way of the world...and we must recognize it."

She stroked the cheek gently and felt Female Merchant jump. It was so sweet, Sword Maiden's eyes squinted in amusement beneath her bandage. She was more and more sure that she must have looked this way to those around her when they had braved that dungeon.

“First, I want you to acknowledge that they exist. That’s different from giving up. And then, on that basis...”

Speak up.

“We don’t judge the evil in the world but call attention to it. That is justice.

“Law is based in justice, but it is not the same thing as justice, nor is judgment. Confuse these things, and one shall tumble into simple self-righteousness.”

Female Merchant stiffened. “Yes...ma’am,” she replied weakly.

“Hee-hee. Very good.”

Sword Maiden backed away, and there was another “Oh.”

There, now that that was dealt with...

“Summon those adventurers, please. Shall we hear what they have to say?”

“Oh, y-yes, ma’am...!” Female Merchant withdrew into the hallway of the temple in something of a tizzy.

“Now, then,” Sword Maiden said as she listened to her go and straightened her own posture.

She herself had mistaken the true way not long ago at all. And it was not her own strength that had brought her back to the right path. Now it was incumbent on her to help someone else, however slight her aid may be, whenever it was within her power. She had felt that way ever since she had first committed herself to the adventurer’s path. Now that she examined it afresh, the feeling seemed cold and hard, like a glass bead.

But, for all that, I think it’s something to be respected.

“Now, my guests... Hee-hee, one has a very heavy sword. An honorable lady knight. A half-elf, a young man...” The other was a child—or perhaps a barefoot rhea?

All these thoughts passed through Sword Maiden’s mind as she turned firmly to the duty at hand.

“Ah, there you are!”

Even the din and bustle of the water town didn’t dampen the perception of an experienced adventurer.

There was a girl sitting on a bench, wearing a green outfit and holding an iron spear in her hand. Yes, they had an arranged meeting, but only the king or the most important nobles had anything so grand (or so precise) as a mechanical watch. He had asked his party member Witch to send her familiar with a message that simply indicated a meeting at this place sometime in the afternoon.

“Yo, been a while. Glad to see you looking well.”

“Yeah, I guess!” The girl bounced up off the bench and grinned brightly. “It’s been rough, though. I’ve been busy like you wouldn’t believe.”

“Aw, yeah? Hey, I see you’ve got a new weapon—trying to imitate yours truly?” Spearman tugged his chin in the direction of her new spear.

He still remembered the spectacular sword she had carried when they’d first met in that carriage. But an impressive weapon wouldn’t contribute as much to your survival as one that suited your body type. The girl, who had been a rank amateur at the time, was now clearly an accomplished adventurer. The slim frame under the green outerwear was clad in chain mail to keep her safe.

“Not even!” she said, answering teasing with teasing. “Everybody picked it together. Stuff that would make us like the heroes from the legend.”

“Huh.” Spearman grinned. “Sounds good to me. So everything’s going great.”

The girl chuckled proudly and puffed out her modest chest; Spearman smiled back with just a hint of sadness. *Everybody* probably meant her, that wizard, and the warrior. They’d made a good choice, he thought.

The spear had to be one of the most common weapons in human history, second perhaps only to the club. Even the Six Heroes who had delved the Dungeon of the Dead ten

years and more ago had a spear user among them...

"I thought that hero was supposed to be beautiful, though," Spearman said with a smirk, recalling the rumors he had heard of that particular adventurer. "Think you need to be a little taller and maybe a little more womanly before the bards start singing about you."

"Aw, now you've gone and done it." The girl smiled even wider and leaned forward. "Just you watch, they'll be singing about me for a hundred years!"

"Ha, I can't wait, kiddo. They can sing me the whole saga."

It was an easy conversation, just a couple of adventurers on a day off. Spearman went ahead and bought the girl some kind of frozen treat—"ice crème"—and she threw up her hands joyfully.

Once they were seated back on the bench, she was quick to start digging in with her spoon. Before long, though, she murmured, "So hey. What are you up to today? We've been talking a lot but always about rumors and stuff."

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You needed to see me right away about something?

Spearman scratched his head with a measure of embarrassment. "Well, uh, I don't know if it qualifies as an emergency or anything, but...I just heard something that seemed a little fishy."

"Fishy?"

"Where I live, the Temple of the Earth Mother makes this wine every year to offer to the gods around the time of the harvest festival." He scratched again, more embarrassed still, as the girl gave him a blank look. "But it's turning into this weird thing this year... I'm just, you know, wondering—you know about anything else happening that might be connected to it?"

".....Huh."

Spearman didn't notice the way the girl narrowed her eyes ever so slightly. The world was full of the seeds of adventure, no matter who you were.



When a fixer tells you, “It’s just in and out. Easy run,” you should be careful. What he means is it’s a rush job, dicey, dangerous, probably tied up with money.

Besides, if it was safe and simple, they wouldn’t be paying our prices.

The young rogue remembered the way his friend had grinned at him; then he got a firm hold on the grappling hook line and placed his feet against the wall. Truthfully, even for money, this wasn’t the sort of place he wanted to be breaking into.

“Are—are you all right...? I’m not too heavy?”

“No, you’re fine.”

The voice came from someone on his back, a sweet sound that tickled his ear. This was hardly the sort of situation to make his heart race, though. He frowned, aware of the lightness and softness of his “buddy,” the mage who had her arms wrapped around his neck.

God, these elves...!

The rogue was young enough to feel a certain embarrassment—scruples, one might say—at having his buddy, a young woman about his age, clinging to him. There were other things he should be focusing on: namely, mentally comparing the rough map provided by the “researcher” with what he had observed of the area during the day.

When they reached the window he had in mind, he drummed on the slim arm around his neck with his fingers. “You’re up.”

“Okay, leave it to me,” she said, then stretched out one

arm over his shoulder, touching the window frame with something in her fingertips. Produced from a bag at her hip, it was a grub that looked like a cross between a centipede and a slug. She whispered a few words to it—a request—and the creature promptly began to squirm, digging into the plaster. Such feeble building materials were no match for a Rock Eater larva.

People might put armor plating over their windows; they might use elaborate locks or put protective magic spells on the glass—but they never thought to protect the window frame. The rogue removed the frame wholesale and slipped into the room. It was someone’s study—or perhaps office. There were bookshelves, a desk, a half-empty bottle of alcohol accompanied by a cup of fine make. There was a fur carpet so thick his feet sank into it; he couldn’t get used to the footing no matter how he tried.

He set down the window frame, careful not to make any noise, and the mage slid off his back. Simultaneously, in a single flowing motion, he unhooked the repeating crossbow hanging from a belt across his chest and brought it up into a firing position. He made sure the chamber was loaded, then found a position that would cover his buddy’s blind spot.

They had this part down to a routine by now. They’d been together quite a while.

“I’ll just have a look around,” she said. “If I see anything interesting, I’ll help myself to it. And I’ll leave them a little loot.”

“That’s the plan.”

“Won’t take me long.”

People only looked for what had been stolen after a break-in. They never looked to see if they had *more* possessions than they’d had before.

Runners didn’t just take the nastiest, smelliest jobs available. Sometimes they charged in; other times, the meat of the mission was simply getting out. Sometimes

kidnapping, sometimes insertion. Diversion was a specialty, as were protection and pursuit, escape, and on occasion, even rescue.

People paid money for someone to do these things. And so they ran. The run was everything. They got their money, and sometimes they played the heroes, sometimes the villains. Few of them specifically hated the Adventurers Guild or the government or the gods—but the first step to being a runner was accepting that you yourself were simply the fingernail of something much bigger.

You get that into your head, or you die, the young rogue thought, as he passed the time by whistling the humorous song that had lately been making the rounds in the water town.

A hero who only kills goblins? Now, that is funny!

Plenty of runners had met their dooms by getting too interested, fighting back no matter who they were fighting against. This run was the same way. There was the guy who had gotten the “loot” for them. The guy who had done all the “research” ahead of time, and plenty of others besides. Probably even a guy who would clean up after it was all over, somebody killing time right now just like he was. What they were handling was just a piece of a piece, the slightest fragment of what the run really encompassed. What that was, they would never know.

And above it all, there was somebody seeking to profit from all this.

The two of them might just be a diversion—or bait. You knew that when you took the job. Of course, whether you did what you were told after you took it was another matter. Johnsons who used runners up and threw them out purely for their own profit didn't live long.

We're small, we know that, the message was. *But don't you dare spit on us. You got that?*

That was his own position on the way he lived, or so he imagined.

I guess that guy, at least, isn't the type to just trick you and then pretend to apologize later.

He saw the face of his friend the fixer in his mind's eye. He might bring dangerous runs, but he wouldn't betray the rogue. Here he was again, on a job whose johnson he knew nothing about, but he could at least rest assured that the person checked out. He had that much faith in his fixer. Of course he did. They were a team.

The girl's voice broke into his reverie. "...All right, all done."

"Mm, good," he said with a nod. "Let's get out of—"

He pulled the trigger on the crossbow at the same instant the door came bursting open.

If the arrows flew like rain, they went bouncing away as if off an umbrella. "Deflect Missile?!" the mage shouted.

"*Gygax!*" the rogue cursed. "This is no tunnel!" He groaned as he ejected the empty cartridge and groped about on his belt for a replacement. The forbidden Magic Eye buried in his eyeball perceived a towering figure in the darkness.

A troll!

Ever since the Demon Lord's army had been broken, remnants of the forces of Chaos had begun to proliferate here in the world of shadows. Dark elves, wights, vampires, none of them remotely welcome. But the least welcome of all was the massive creature now charging toward him, shrugging off crossbow bolts like it didn't even feel them. And the Deflect Missile charm around his neck didn't make him any better...!

"TOOOOORREOORRRRRR!!!!"

But even here, the rogue was not alone.

"*Umbra...lupus...libero!* Be free, dark wolf!" The incantation, jingling like a bell, unbound the beast and went flying from the mage's shadow, on the attack. The fangs, woven from magic, tore into the monster, rending flesh. The rogue didn't miss his moment.

"Let's get out of here!"

"Right!"

No hesitation. He was just a touch gratified by the trust she showed in him as she rushed over and grabbed on to him. He hefted her willowy body and jumped out the window into the night.

He felt himself floating. Then falling. He heard her muffled shout. He wished for his grappling hook. A necessary expense. He could invoice for it later.

Thump. The impact ran through his whole body, absorbed by his magically augmented limbs. Another little forbidden enhancement. Sacrificing some of his Essence had been worth it.

He heard her voice in his ear. "...! I'm sorry; they got me!"

"It's all right!" Even as he answered, he kicked off the ground into a run. Something huge came crashing down where he had been an instant before.

"OOOOOLE!!!!" The troll, which had succeeded in tearing apart their shadow-beast, came after them, howling. No wonder nobody liked these guys.

But, again, the rogue was still not alone. A fact for which he was very, very thankful.

"C'mon, kid, pick up the pace!"

"Your timing couldn't be better!"





A hansom cab—two wheels, one horse—clattered up to the mansion's front gate. Another team member of his was in the driver's seat. "Bit of trouble?" he asked.

"A runner if we're lucky, a runner if we're not. Take her for me."

"Eek!" His buddy gave a girlish scream (she was a girl, after all) as he flung her into the carriage. Then, the moment the young rogue had a hand on the driver's bench, the carriage set off at top speed.

There were, of course, two other people in the passenger compartment—or more precisely, one person and one animal.

".....There, good, got it. I blew off the Deflect Missile amulet."

"And I've got the guards on a wild-goose chase with an illusion! We should have plenty of time!"

One was a cleric girl, a follower of the God of Knowledge, "jacked in" via meditation, and the other was another mage's familiar.

He didn't know why a servant of the gods would sink to being a rogue. When asked, the cleric always just laughed and said, "Lest darkness fall." Maybe that was really it, then. He also didn't know why the other mage, unlike his buddy, only showed their familiar. What he knew was that whether or not he could see the spell caster, he could count on the spells that were mediated through the familiar. So none of them had a reason not to trust her (they thought it was a her).

Hell, you didn't need a fancy title to be part of a team. Cleric or mage or whatever. It was a good party, the rogue was convinced.

"Time to fly!" the driver shouted. "*Go now, kelpie, it's time to get busy! Earth to river and sea to sky, turn all a-tizzy!*" When he called out to the sprites, the kelpie pulling the carriage neighed and picked up speed. It was heading straight for one of the canals that crisscrossed this place,

the water town. They were the best escape routes of all.

“Just gotta do my job, then...”

The fixer did the investigation and set up the run. The cleric of the God of Knowledge, and the mage with her familiar, provided support. The sprite-user driver got them in and, more importantly, out.

Up at the front, that left his buddy—and him, just a rogue. There were plenty of others if they needed a new one. He remembered his fixer friend laughing as he said, “Only thing that’ll be any different is the personality.” The rogue was fine with that. The highest praise was to stand out from the rest of the pile for competence. Right?

Off in the darkness, his forbidden Magic Eye could see the troll charging after them, the breath coming hot from his nostrils. The rogue kept one hand on the driver’s bench, taking aim with his crossbow with the other. *Bap-bap-bap-bap-bap-bap*. With a series of high-pitched twangs, the crossbow sent a hail of arrows at the monster.

It was still a troll. It wasn’t going to die from a few pinpricks. There was that huge, leering face.

“See you in hell.”

But pinpricks weren’t all he had: In his left hand, he was already holding the simple cylinder he had produced from his belt, already pulling the trigger. From beyond the flash of flintlock and the white puff of gunpowder, there was a splatter of blood. The massive body, now missing its head, clawed at the air like a drowning creature, then fell backward, out of sight.

There, perfect. No witnesses. The rogue grinned to himself, replaced the crossbow at his belt, and breathed a big sigh. Guys who judged their own performance based on how many enemies they had brought down and how much ammo they had used didn’t understand. His one-use cylinder was a trump card that could punch through armor from close distance, and he had been right to use it.

Clearing the highest hurdles brings the highest reward.

He thought of the arrows he'd used and the rope he'd left behind in much the same way. Considering they had saved his life, they were cheap at the price. And all things did have a price. That was how the world worked. He hoped he could convince the others to split the reward only after expenses had been deducted, but...

That's fixer work, trying to pry more money out of people after things have already started.

There was a gentle tapping sound on the carriage. He looked back to see the mage girl smiling through the glass behind the driver's bench.

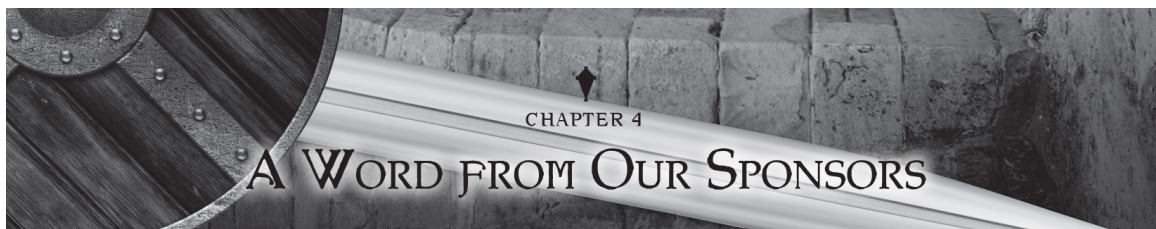
The rogue smiled, too. She had her fist pressed to the window, and he pressed his to the other side.

"Nice work."

"You too."

Their voices were carried away by splashes of water as they all ran through the shadows of the capital.

For these nameless shadows, it was just another night, just another run.



Humans are a strange lot: The moment anything happens, they hope and expect for everything to change.

A human becomes an adventurer, say, and they immediately want to go on a great quest that will decide the fate of the world. Or they learn the sword and expect that the next day they'll be a renowned master known even in the realm of the dead. Wizards seek secrets of worlds yet unknown to man, while poets look to be household names in the capital...

These are perfectly ordinary dreams, not to be mocked or sneered at, but they are also not realistic. Why should things change immediately just because something has happened?

Priestess had been an adventurer for two and some odd years now, and she had come to understand and accept this—or she thought she had.

"Siiiigh..."

But somehow as she went from the Guild to the Temple of the Earth Mother, then from there back to the Guild through the morning mist, she found nothing but sighs on her lips. After all, she had thought the situation was different now. Goblin Slayer had taken the matter in hand. Everyone was helping. Even the other adventurers. And yet it had been days now—and nothing had changed. The rumors kept spreading. Nothing else seemed to move.

She went from the Guild to the Temple and back virtually every day, and today her footsteps felt even heavier than usual. Once again, it wasn't as if anything specific had happened. It was just that the unyielding accumulation of

the days had begun to weigh upon Priestess's narrow shoulders.

Today, like every other day, everyone at the Temple had greeted her warmly (well, everyone except High Elf Archer, who was still asleep). Dwarf Shaman had calmly given his seal of approval, while Lizard Priest agreed that spending an entire day in thought could be quite a good thing. What they were saying was precisely this: that they would continue to guard the Temple despite the fact that they were receiving no reward for it.

Then there was her "older sister," who welcomed her with a smile and saw her off the same way: Sister Grape. The rumors must have reached her ears by now, but she showed no sign of it. Even though Priestess herself could think only of Goblin Slayer.

"Hooo..." Another sigh. The days since they had visited those rogues' hideout felt like weeks. She was hard-pressed to get up in the morning and afraid to go to sleep at night. She just passed the time vacantly, and it was terrible indeed.

Today, here she was back in front of the Adventurers Guild, with things no different than before.

Goblin Slayer...

What was he thinking? That was the question that bubbled up in Priestess's mind, but she shook her head. She shouldn't—couldn't—think such things. Goblin Slayer, the leader of her party, must have had some idea in mind. But she couldn't just follow blithely after him. That would mean—that would mean nothing had changed from when she had first started adventuring, wouldn't it?

Priestess bit her lip, hard, then pushed through the door into the Guild. The sound of the morning bustle slammed into her.

"Well, welcome back!" This very first greeting came from Guild Girl, absorbed in some kind of work at the reception desk. She had surely heard the rumors as well but, perhaps

out of consideration for Priestess, never mentioned them.

Priestess, always grateful for this small act of decency, answered, "Thank you," and did her best to smile.

"Goblin Slayer is already here, you know—just in case you were looking for him."

"Oh, thank you. Will it be another day of—?"

Goblin slaying?

The words died on Priestess's lips as she looked toward the waiting area. He was easy to spot even among the press of adventurers looking for quests. He was the one on the bench in the corner of the room, just where he always was, wearing grimy leather armor and a cheap-looking metal helmet.

"Hey," she heard, and "Yo," and "Goblins again today?" and "Give 'em hell," and on and on. In her two years or so as an adventurer, the young girl who had never known anything but the Temple of the Earth Mother had cultivated a surprising number of relationships. She didn't always know their names or even what they were really like. But these men and women were all adventurers like her. Her colleagues came in many races, as well, and Priestess bowed respectfully to each one with a polite "Good morning." There were former novices, newcomers who showed great promise, all of them adventurers together...

Am I really one of them...?

She herself was the least confident about it of all.

§

"Wow, that archbishop lady sure talks a good game!"

"I thought for sure they were gonna turn us away at the front door," Heavy Warrior said with a touch of exasperation as he watched the priestess patter away.

He looked at Female Knight with an expression that said, *You almost had me thinking you were a real knight of the*

Supreme God in there, but she didn't seem to notice. She was too busy shaking her head vigorously.

"And of course she would, what with us talking to her about goblin slaying. More fool me for doubting her!"

"Y'think?" Heavy Warrior said, more or less ignoring her.

What mattered was that the Temple of the Supreme God had decided to act and that this action seemed like it could lead to an adventure that would earn them some money. After all, a person couldn't live on adventure alone—they needed to eat, too. Money was important. Not the only thing, but it mattered. All the more so when you were carting along two kids whose advancement was delayed because they'd lied about their ages.

Money in the hand meant food in the mouth. A bed to sleep in. Fresh, new equipment and weapons. Items when you needed them. With a generous enough donation—which was to say, with enough money—one might even be granted the miracle of Resurrection, by which one could be recalled from across the river of death. You could literally buy life, up to a point.

Some people preached austerity and frugality, but this had never made much sense to Heavy Warrior. Money wasn't to be taken lightly, but so long as you had it, it made your life easier, and you should use it when you needed it.

Maybe I ought to make a donation to the Temple of the God of Trade. The thought crossed his mind even though he didn't particularly believe in the gods. Heavy Warrior turned to his friends.

"How'd it go for you?"

"Big ol' bust." Spearman waved a discouraged hand as he jogged up, arriving with a backflip. Beside him was Witch, smoking her pipe, maybe listening to the conversation, maybe not.

It was all perfectly ordinary. Maybe it was time to pay taxes, Heavy Warrior thought, setting his own concerns aside for the time being.

"I asked an acquaintance of mine who handles city adventures, but it didn't get me anywhere, at least not real quick," Spearman said.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. We're hack-and-slash specialists, man. This isn't our game."

His confident declaration provoked a quiet "Heh, heh" from Witch.

"Guess it only makes sense," Female Knight offered. "Each of us has a role we're best at."

"Hmm," Heavy Warrior grunted. "You manage to say something significant every once in a while, in spite of yourself."

"Dumbass, *everything* I say is significant."

"If you say so," Heavy Warrior replied with a tired wave.

Female Knight ignored him. "Listen up," she said, assuming an air of importance. "Anyone who says he can do it all himself is just an idiot who doesn't see the real truth."

"Hoh." Spearman grinned. "Little early in the day to start sermonizing, isn't it?" But anyway, he needed some way to kill time until the morning quest papers came out. And he didn't see his sweet Guild Girl anywhere.

"Mm," Female Knight responded with confidence. "It's never too early to learn something new—and I'm about to teach you."

"What if I don't wanna be taught, O fair knight?"

"Let's start with a hypothetical. Suppose there was a Bronze adventurer who could cleave heaven and earth with his sword, who destroyed a Dark God, but who never went past Bronze rank because it would be too much trouble."

"Who would do that?"

"Let's just say."

This seemed to beggar Spearman's imagination, but he nodded along, despite his distinct sense that even the heroes of the stories were more grounded than this.

"Just think about it," Female Knight said. "This

adventurer's clothes, his food, his vegetables, meat, shoes, his inn, and even his very country, are all produced by someone else, are they not?"

"Yeah, and I'm sure he's got a lady love—or a lord love, I guess. Anyway, someone who cares about him, plus his parents." Spearman's comment was not in particularly good faith. Witch silently kicked him in the shin. He was enough of a man not to shout about it.

Female Knight didn't seem to notice: "Right, exactly," she said, impressed. "Anyone who says they make all those things for themselves is lying through their teeth."

"Come, to think of it," Witch said with some interest, twirling her pipe and then taking a drag, "it is...sometimes said: to make wine, requires a steady beat. If the map of the stars changes, the flavor...of the wine changes, too."

A word or two of praise for the goddess's bountiful bosom is important...and so on.

Witch recited these words from an ancient sage, and Female Knight replied, "Exactly," nodding firmly. Even the gods did not act alone. To think of any one person as omnipotent and omniscient was laughable. But Female Knight wasn't done yet. "So since you can't do everything, trust others to do what you can't!"

"*You* don't trust others; you *force* others," Heavy Warrior said, deflating her at the very climax of her speech. "When someone's got power, whether it's a god or a devil, it's *their* power. They can use it how they like."

"But as they say, with great power comes great responsibility...!"

"Sure, you saved the world, thanks, have a nice day. You want to be a farmer, fine, whatever. The lot of you would get in a fight with a devil if you saw one."

To Heavy Warrior, it all seemed very simple, but Female Knight dug in her heels: "Hold on, now."

Heavy Warrior half looked at her, smirking, a bit annoyed but altogether familiar with this sort of reaction. "You need

to stop putting your gloves on before your helmet. You always have to have someone hold your hair back!”

“Hrrgh...!” That was a critical hit. Female Knight, struck to the quick, let out a *hrk* and *hagh* a few times before she finally seemed to collect herself. “It—it hardly matters, does it not? It’s not as if it’s a great deal of effort!”

“Not saying it is. Just saying you’re acting like you don’t think this applies to you.” Heavy Warrior shrugged, Female Knight continued to grind her teeth, and Spearman just looked at the two of them, not quite rolling his eyes.

Witch let her gaze drift toward the ground. *Either of them could be on either side of this argument.* She laughed. They just didn’t give up.

“What I’m trying to say is that a great hero is a great hero exactly because they’re able to make this distinction...!”

“I don’t know *what* you’re trying to say.”

At length, Witch began to let the conversation wash over her, turning to her own thoughts. Ultimately, a conversation like this meant nothing. It was simply ordinary banter. The world was so big, and what we saw was by no means all of it; things could be moving in places unexpected. The very heart of magic was to see through all of this, to pierce to the truth.

What was happening? What would become of them? Even if she was looking at only the barest edge, she could extrapolate from there.

And it led her to...

“I, do...wonder how, things will go...”

One thing was certain: It was going to be another interesting adventure.

§

“Uh, um, g-good morning, Goblin Slayer, sir...,” Priestess

said as she came pattering up to him. The response from the pathetic-looking adventurer was the same as ever: "Yes."

It was an everyday occurrence here at the Guild in the frontier town: He was the first to arrive in the morning, yet the last to ever take a quest. Adventurers who had been around awhile grew used to the sight of the suit of armor sitting motionless in a corner of the waiting area. Newcomers and novices often goggled at first, but they, too, soon ceased to pay him any mind. To them, an adventurer who specialized in goblin slaying wasn't worth paying attention to.

In recent years, he had appeared to gather something of a party and began regularly working with them, but right now he was alone—no, with just one other person. His dwarf, his elf, and his lizardman hadn't been seen for the past few days.

"Goblin slaying again, sir...?" Priestess asked as she hesitantly took a seat beside him. That emotion in her voice—was it awe or just hesitation?

How long had it been since the two of them started handling quests together? Not a short time. Several years. Although whether that was a long time or not depended on whom you asked...

"Yes." The voice of the adventurer called Goblin Slayer was low, his words short and dispassionate. "After we see how things are going."

"...Right." Priestess nodded firmly, and with that, the conversation ended. Idle chatter from the other adventurers filled the air, meaningless waves of sound reaching her ears. Silence could be hard to endure, but with enough noise to fill in the gaps, maybe it wasn't so bad.

After sitting there uncomfortably for a few moments, though, her little behind shifting on the seat, Priestess opened her mouth. "Uh, um..."

"What is it?"

"I-is there, uh, anything that...needs to be done?"

It was an ambiguous utterance, no actor mentioned at all, and even as she spoke, Priestess appeared to sink into embarrassment. It wasn't clear at first what she was embarrassed about. Was it the sheer lack of clarity of her question, or was she perhaps ashamed of herself for not having taken any action?

Goblin Slayer grunted once, then continued quietly, "I've already played my hand."

"Wha...?" Priestess looked at him, startled, like a child who'd been set back on her heels.

"Not that I have actually done anything yet," he said by way of preface. "But when you're hunting a deer, sometimes it's best not to move."

"A deer...?"

"Until your quarry thinks you are just a tree or rock by the roadside."

That was when you loosed your bolt, a single arrow that would pierce a vital point—or so he claimed he had been told.

"Huh," Priestess breathed, in a combination of admiration and annoyance. Then she put a thin finger to her chin with a thoughtful "Hmm," after which she continued soberly, "You know a lot of different things, don't you?"

"I will make use of anything I can," Goblin Slayer said, sounding something more than humble. "Ultimately, I am not really a ranger, a scout, or even a warrior."

"...But still, you know a lot," Priestess repeated. She counted off on her fingers: about adventurers, about fighting, about how to search a cave. "There are so many things you know, things you think about... It's kind of unfair."

"Is that so?"

"It is."

"I see..."

The words were soft—it wasn't clear if Goblin Slayer agreed with her or not—but then he fell into silence. Priestess looked at the metal helmet for a few moments before she said quietly, almost to herself, "...I wonder if I'll eventually know so many things, too."

"I can't say."

"You can't say...what?"

"I've never considered myself that clever." *I wouldn't know.*

Priestess found that she couldn't pursue the subject any further. Instead, she puffed out her cheeks like a temperamental child, but when she realized she had done it, she straightened up. "In that case, I'll study." She was sure she sounded a bit pouty, but also as if she enjoyed the prospect. "I'll study everything I can, learn and train... I'll do my very best."

"I see," Goblin Slayer said and nodded. "That's good."

"*Uh-huh,*" Priestess responded like an obedient student, then went quiet again. The hubbub of the Guild Hall sounded in her ears once more, idle chatter filling the space around them.

If that was all idle chatter, though, then what about their conversation just now? It must have been equally as meaningless. Such moments never lasted very long anyway. The staff member who had zipped away from the reception desk returned with a sheaf of papers...

"All right, everyone! Here are today's job postings!"

There was an excited shout from adventurers who had been waiting for this moment; they rushed the bulletin board. Some of the jobs were easy, some were hard, but what they all had in common was that an adventurer who didn't work wouldn't eat.

"Hey, get a load of this one!"

"What's that? Guarding the Temple of the Earth Mother?"

This most unexpected exchange reached Priestess from

the burble of the crowd, making her tremble.

"What, they afraid some punk who heard the rumors is gonna come after 'em?"

"No, man, I heard they got help from the Temple of the Supreme God..."

"Huh, sounds good. And lucrative!"

"Hey, you know what they say—what goes around, comes around. It's, like, good karma to help people in trouble."

The adventurers each grabbed a quest, saying whatever seemed good to them. Priestess watched them with an indescribable expression on her face. Perhaps she was thinking, *But they were spreading the rumors, too!* The idea that this thought must be welling up in her heart caused a moment of hesitation, but it had to be done. That was when a certain person gathered his resolve and stood, striding directly among the adventurers.

"—?"

The girl turned a perplexed gaze on him. The metal helmet, however, bore no expression. He swallowed audibly: "*Eep.*" This adventurer looked like there might not *be* anything inside his armor, a Nonexistent Knight. It added intimidation to the natural hesitation, and he stiffened.

"Do you need something?"

"Yes" came the brief response. But the voice was so scratchy, so high-pitched. That would never do. He took a deep breath, then cleared his throat. "I beg you. This is a quest most urgent. Please...I beg you to help us." The voice of the son of the wine seller from the water town was soft and pleading.

§

"Goblins?"

"No... Well, yes."

Priestess was the very first to fix a serious gaze on the young man with his inarticulate pronouncements.

The son of the wine merchant. The one from the water town. To Priestess, he could not have identified himself as something more loaded with meaning. She opened her mouth to say something, but the words stuck in her throat.

What can I say...?

Should she taunt him? Coldly refuse him? Get angry, shout, cry, or outright attack him?

To be perfectly frank, it wasn't clear yet that this young man's father was the source of the rumors. As to that...she had investigated and searched, and she was convinced they were moving. Of course, she had no proof. It was better for them that no proof existed...

Priestess's head whirled with thoughts that might be deduction or conjecture or pure fantasy. It was just—she thought it had to be true. Someone who mattered to her had been hurt.

And there's no reason at all for me not to pay them back.

The thought pushed into her heart. It started to spread like a seed putting out sprouts.

Goblin daughter. With others eager to spread such vicious rumors, why should she be the only one to hold back? *A little late to come begging,* she could say. Selfish. *Apologize,* she could order him. *Not my problem. Serves you right.*

Was it possible? Of course it was. She just had to let her emotions carry her away. But...she, Priestess, lived her life in the *faith* that this was not the right thing to do.

The path she walked prized comforting people, being considerate of them, helping the world when you could. That was her faith, these sixteen or seventeen years of her life.

Of course, everyone had their personal circumstances, their motivations, and not all of them could be forgiven. But to lash out thoughtlessly, it was just too...

Pathetic.

Priestess sucked in a deep breath to clear the catch in her throat. To help disperse the dark, heavy, sticky heat that had bubbled up in her chest.

"I...", she said, then had to take a breath to keep going. "I can at least hear him out."

"I see." It was always those same two words with Goblin Slayer. Somehow, Priestess could hardly bear it. "Then let us hear it. Is here okay?"

"Well, uh..." The merchant's son seemed to be alerted by the conversation to the holy symbol Priestess held. He scratched his cheek guiltily and glanced around at the press of adventurers seeking their morning quests. None of them were paying special attention to the little group, but of course there were many eyes and ears here. The ability to know what was going on in the vicinity was a matter of life and death for an adventurer.

"I guess it's a little late to be worrying about reputation," the young man mumbled but continued through gritted teeth, "but if we could, I'd like to use a meeting room or something..."

"Very well." Goblin Slayer nodded and turned to glance in the direction of the reception desk. Guild Girl had her hands full dealing with all the adventurers registering their quests. But he certainly couldn't just help himself to one of the rooms...

"...Oh."

Just then, his eyes met those of Inspector, who was curled up in a corner with some paperwork in her hands. She nonchalantly put away the book she was hiding behind the papers and gave him a grin. Goblin Slayer, undeterred, pointed silently to the merchant's son and then to the second floor. Inspector nodded, glanced at the very busy Guild Girl, then put a finger to her lips. *Our little secret.* But he had his permission, which was all he wanted.

"Let's go."

“Y-yeah...”

Two dispassionate words and a bold stride, and the merchant’s son was left to follow in confusion.

“...” Priestess bit her lip and held fast to her sounding staff but came close behind. They went up to the second floor, all the way to the end of the hall. This was not the part of the second floor that doubled as an inn for adventurers. Instead, it was where the Guild conducted administrative business. Realizing that she had hardly been here except for her promotion interviews, Priestess felt a swell of anxiety.

No, no. That was just an excuse. Even she realized that much. Her emotions ran completely unchecked within her. But even so, she was set on listening to this man.

They pushed open a heavy door and entered a room packed to the gills with mementos of the deeds of past adventurers. There were sparkling jewels, military awards, recorded songs, and famous weapons and shields...

It was a trophy room. Filled with things far more impressive than the occasional monster head or sawed-off horn that graced the tavern.

Maybe these things were only present to impress would-be quest givers. But still, noticing a plain metal war hammer sitting among everything, Priestess felt a touch of pride. Then self-esteem turned to courage, and she plopped herself down onto the long bench in the room.

The wine merchant’s son sat across from her, while Goblin Slayer settled beside her. Priestess felt the cushion sink and the bench creak under the weight of his equipment.

“All right, tell us about your business,” Goblin Slayer said after some brief introductions.

The merchant’s son fell silent—looking at him more calmly now, Priestess realized he was younger than she had first thought. Maybe it was the color his face and skin derived from the rich food he ate, or maybe it was his

elegant dress. He was about twenty years old, she guessed, perhaps a little older. About the time when a son would take over a father's business and start getting some experience.

Priestess didn't let these speculations get in the way of paying close attention to the man across from her. She didn't have the Sense Lie miracle.

"I finally found out for sure," he said. "My father made a contract with the agents of Chaos."

With no miracle to help her, Priestess would have to judge for herself whether what he was saying was true.

§

"I noticed my father was acting strange.

"It wasn't that business was down. We were fine, financially. And yet, he was desperate. And then those rumors started about the Temple of the Earth Mother, and my father jumped on the opportunity.

"I'm not trying to make excuses here, but it felt very strange to me.

"Merchantry isn't a noble pursuit—when there's chaos, you take advantage of it to turn a profit. But that's just business... On a personal level, we don't take any more joy in the suffering of others than anyone else.

"But my father, he was smiling and laughing. He's dedicated to his business, very serious, very loyal, and—although maybe this isn't for me to say—highly capable. I've watched him work since I was a boy; the smell of wine on his clothes *was* the smell of my father.

"...I'm sorry. Yes, I know. That isn't the point here...

"The point is, he was desperate.

"Wine-making was going well, and the money was flowing. He was bent on growing, on expanding his business. When I look back on it now, I think that's where the seeds of Chaos were sown.

“It’s a cycle: You work to make money. He put the money into expanding the business. As the business expands, you have more work. But by the same token, as your business expands, there’s less money to go around, and if the work doesn’t go well, the business slows down, and you lose your cushion.

“My father was desperate. And that...was probably what drove him to join forces with those servants of Chaos. He probably thought he would play along with their plans and make his money somewhere in between the plots.

“Laughable, I know. He was tricked—when have the forces of Chaos ever worked with the likes of us, right? But when business beckons...well, profit makes strange bedfellows. Justice and compassion fall by the wayside.

“Look, I’m not trying to say we’re blameless and innocent. I’ve turned to people who lurk in the shadows before. Plausible deniability with them. Everyone knows it’s all supposed to stay nice and quiet—er, excuse me, I’m getting off topic again.

“...My father, in his fear, went to all and sundry, making plans, making contracts, making sure to leave a trail of evidence. In other words: *If I go down, everything becomes public, and you all go down with me.*

“Just a little guarantee. Of course, they were full of threats on their end about what would happen to him if he betrayed them. You can laugh if you want, but it was surely a mistake.

“The other day, some thieves broke into the residence of the town’s captain of the guard. It wasn’t the first time it’s happened; tobacco and drugs have been stolen before. But this time was different. The thief was a *troll*. Word is he tore up the captain’s personal chamber, then ran off but was killed by some passing adventurers.

“But this troll, see? Somehow, in all the excitement, he dropped *my father’s contract* in the guard captain’s room. And that was it. The guards, furious at the loss of face,

started chasing him down, and then it all came out. My father was arrested, and the business is probably ruined.

"As for me—my only saving grace was that I didn't know anything about any of this. They proved it with Sense Lie at the Temple of Law in the water town.

"Naturally, I can't just inherit the business and say all's well that ends well. *They* know this is all public now.

"A couple of days ago, now—in the morning. I have this one servant, a man who was in that battle ten years ago. He told me he'd found some footprints behind our house. Said he recognized them. No question.

"Said they were goblin tracks."

§

Other than the young man's voice, a terrible silence reigned over the meeting room from the moment he started talking until the moment he finished. The wine merchant's son piled one word upon another as if to show he was not making anything up. Even without the Sense Lie miracle, Priestess felt his words had the ring of truth.

There are, in fact, a number of ways to defeat Sense Lie, a nasty part of her whispered into her heart, and it pained her to admit it was there.

"I see; so that's how they moved." Goblin Slayer's dispassionate voice reached the ears of Priestess as she agonized.

Wha—? She glanced over at the helmet, but there was no response to her, only more words.

"You've tried the Guild?"

"Yes, I put through an official request," the young man said. "Although no one would take it, at least not in the water town." In the smallest of jokes, he shrugged self-deprecatingly and said, "Not because it was a goblin hunt, but because I'm the son of a man who was working with

Chaos.”

“That’s—,” Priestess started, but realizing she didn’t know how to finish that sentence, she closed her mouth again.

That’s only natural? That’s what you get? No, no, no. No, that wasn’t her. She didn’t want to speak those words aloud. Her clenched hands trembled so hard her staff jangled.

“But it appears to me you were not attacked the next day.”

“My servant said if we could get a few men with weapons to stand guard, it would keep the goblins from getting too close.”

“Hmm,” Goblin Slayer grunted, thinking to himself as he dispassionately continued the conversation. His imperturbable detachment caused Priestess to listen as closely as she could.

“It’s not like we didn’t already have protection... Although after all the uproar, most of them quit.” But the household still had equipment, along with several servants and men-at-arms. They had been put on guard, changing positions every night, and a scarecrow wearing armor had been erected in the vineyards.

Goblin Slayer dismissed this feeble effort with a few words. “That will only delay the inevitable. It’s not bad, but I doubt you have much time.”

“Yeah... That’s why I went to the Temple of Law. I wasn’t trying to hide the shame of what happened.”

But now that the plans of Chaos had come to light, they had to be dealt with—and quickly. The Temple of the Supreme God had already initiated plans to support the Temple of the Earth Mother, dispatching people to that end. But they could hardly spare strength for a simple goblin hunt. Especially one that seemed like just deserts, one a traitor and his son had brought down upon themselves.

“But...I’d gotten friendly with this one woman at the

temple, a daughter of a prominent noble house who works as an independent merchant now.” The young man’s face finally softened, as if he saw salvation in sight. “She was kind enough to set up a meeting...and the archbishop heard what I had to say.”

“And that is how I am involved?”

“That’s right. She said there was an adventurer in the frontier town to the west who slew goblins...”

Priestess could practically picture the scene. The former Noble Fencer—now Female Merchant—and Sword Maiden, the moment they heard the word *goblins*. The welter of thoughts and feelings became too complicated, and Priestess felt a prickling in her chest.

“I’ll try.”

Therefore, the words were exactly what she expected, sharp—and terribly painful.

“You’re taking him up on it?!” Priestess found her voice far harsher and more critical than she had intended. She flinched and put her hands over her mouth, but she couldn’t take the words back.

“There’s no reason to turn him down.”

“But...!”

But what? Did she intend to argue that they shouldn’t take the job?

Her own words in her heart were so dark and cruel that she wanted to press her hands over her ears and curl up into a ball. But she couldn’t escape them, not even if she pulled out her eyes and tore off her ears and pulled out her tongue.

Still, the words Goblin Slayer said to her as she sat there pale and trembling were blunt. “Whoever they are and whatever it happens, I don’t think it’s good for anyone to be killed by goblins.”

“Ah...” Priestess looked up dimly—vacantly—at the cheap-looking metal helmet. His face and eyes were shrouded by shadow somewhere behind the visor. But she

felt as if he could see straight into her heart, and she looked back at the ground.

Yes.

He was exactly right.

Just because someone's father had done something wrong, just because she didn't like it, didn't mean it made no difference what happened to him.

That would be the same as laughing at someone because you thought they were the daughter of a goblin.

It would be, in fact, to act like a goblin yourself.

"Do you have a map of your house, of the land around it? I want to get a feel for it before I see it for myself."

"Y-yes, I do...!" The wine merchant's son nodded, looking like he couldn't believe what he was hearing. He nodded again and again, desperately. Overwhelmed with emotion, he even clasped Goblin Slayer's rough hand and shook it vigorously. "Will you really do it...?"

"I will do what I can."

"Thank you, you've saved me...! Anything you need, tell me—anything in my power, I'll make it ready for you! I'll do whatever I can to help!"

Finally, the conversation is simpler, Goblin Slayer thought. Unlike Priestess's, his heart was like a becalmed sea. He might even have said this felt somehow inevitable. The goblins would come. He would be there waiting and would kill them. Every last one of them.

It was nothing special. Just what he always did. Even if there was much to think about, there was no need to worry. It was easy.

Adventures are fun, but...

It pained him to have to sit and wait to see what would happen, not knowing if the plan he had put into motion would work. In his mind, it was ideal to take a situation in hand, to change things oneself, to know what was going on. None of that should be ceded to others.

...One should not do what one is unused to, Goblin Slayer

thought, and underneath his helmet, his lips twisted upward ever so slightly.

Maybe it was simply that he had done one thing for so long that he had become accustomed to it. Gracious...

But this is what I'm suited to. Not city adventures.

"...Oh, yes," Goblin Slayer said. He had been rubbing his finally freed hand when something occurred to him. "I believe you know, there is a farm on the outskirts of town."

"Er, yes. Yes, I think I've seen it. I believe my father was trying to buy the place." That had come out of left field, and while the wine merchant's son was confused, he intuitively grasped that this was something important and nodded seriously.

"What did you think of it?"

"What did I think?" *Well, now.* The young man crossed his arms and gazed at the ceiling and pondered. The animals had looked healthy and well cared for; the place as a whole had seemed prosperous. The pastureland was rich and green and expansive, excellent for grazing. It had had a fence and a stone wall to match its size, each obviously well-kept. There was one natural conclusion:

"An excellent farm, I thought."

"I see," Goblin Slayer said and nodded. "I think so, too."

For him, that was enough. It left only one other thing to confirm. As he started mentally planning what he would do, Goblin Slayer turned his head. Priestess was still looking at the ground, but perhaps she sensed him turning to her, because she shivered.

"Come or don't come, as you wish."

§

"And you actually took the job?"

"...Yes."

"Geez, you really are hopeless."

“...Please don’t imitate me.”

“Sorry, sorry,” High Elf Archer offered with a good-natured laugh and a wave of her hand.

They were just in front of the gate to the Temple of the Earth Mother, and it was crawling with adventurers. Or more precisely, there were many other adventurers on the road like Goblin Slayer and Priestess as they headed for the temple. Of course, although they each had accepted the work, they weren’t there just to cooperate with this strange man. Adventurers moved for only one reason: adventure. For one thing, the person offering this particular quest was the archbishop of the Temple of Law in the water town—Sword Maiden herself.

The place they were protecting was the Temple of the Earth Mother. And to top it all off, they would be fighting the forces of Chaos. The story and the reward were both compelling. Everyone liked a good excuse to cause a little mayhem. And so the adventurers had pressed in—*Me too, me too!*—in hopes of getting a piece of the action.

They wore every kind of equipment imaginable and chattered ceaselessly with one another. The eyes of the temple adepts sparkled at the scene as they ran back and forth to look after everyone...

I wonder if we should have done this to begin with? Priestess thought, picturing the time when all she knew of adventurers came from storybooks and the handful who filtered into the temple looking for healing. If they had done it, she was sure things would be very different now.

She looked away from Goblin Slayer, who was deep in conversation with Dwarf Shaman and Lizard Priest. She had acted thoughtfully, she felt, but it still wasn’t enough. She hadn’t *accomplished* anything. She had nothing to show for her work. Maybe she would have gotten better results by just letting others handle everything. What if, instead of grappling with all those difficult emotions, she had just handed it over to someone else, maybe someone

important?

"Don't think it would have worked out."

"Wha...?"

Priestess found her gloomy thoughts ushered away by the voice of High Elf Archer, clear as a bell. Had she accidentally spoken aloud? Without meaning to, she glanced at the elf's face and found her drawing a circle in the air with her pointer finger. "You just need to do what you're capable of doing. You do it because you can. And then it's done. Right?"

"You... You think so?"

Priestess's mood still wasn't improved, and her face remained clouded. She questioned whether she could really do flawless work when she was not one of those who sat at the starry table in the heavens.

"Listen."

"Yeeep...?!" She suddenly found High Elf Archer tapping her gently on the nose, like an older sister scolding a younger.

"You requested we do bodyguard work. And no enemy ever showed up. Brilliant, I think. Or are you upset about it?"

"I'm not upset," Priestess said, pressing her hands to her nose. "But do you really think it's all right?"

"When you do what you're supposed to do and nobody ends up unhappy—of course it's all right."

For creatures with such short life spans, humans get caught up in the smallest things—and miss what's right in front of their eyes. High Elf Archer gave an elaborate shrug and shook her head. Even this dramatic and comical gesture, when performed by a high elf, became astonishingly elegant. Then her eyes narrowed like a mischievous cat's.

"I agree it was one boring adventure, though. And then the *next* thing we have to do is a goblin hunt!"

I'll have to make sure Orcbolg pays us back for this. But

High Elf Archer's words were, in fact, quite lighthearted.

"That's true," Priestess agreed with a quick nod and then cast her eyes over the adventurers.

It was, as we've explained, fairly good work—but also, in a sense, fairly simple work. Most of the adventurers who had gathered were rookies who had some experience of the sewers or goblin hunting at best. There were no higher ranks, no Bronzes or Silvers, to be seen; everyone there seemed somehow still innocent and new.

"Sword, check! Club, check! Brow cover and chest armor, check! Torch—well, maybe we don't need it?"

"Can't hurt to have along. Then there's the potions and stuff... Be sure not to drop them."

"They should be fine, I made sure to tie them tight. C'mon, spin around. I'll check you over."

Rookie Warrior and Apprentice Cleric—no, one hesitated to use those names for them anymore—were among the parties present. Since their adventure on the snowy mountain, the two of them—well, in fact, they had *not* suddenly burst onto the scene as full-fledged, experienced questers. Rather, they continued to do what they had been doing, making steady progress taking one step forward at a time. But perhaps their advancement was just a little bit faster than it had been before.

"Hullo, hullo, so you've all come for the same job, have ye?" The comment came from the source of the party's quickened growth—their newest member, Harefolk Hunter, with a spring in the step as always. Her (she was probably a *her*) long ears swayed from side to side, and her long feet tapped restlessly, betraying a fine mood. "Phew, I just hardly know one face from another yet. Great relief, bein' with the lot of you." Then, with an "Ahem, excuse me," she pulled some berries from her pouch and stuffed them into her cheeks. Harefolk could keep moving so long as they had food, but without provisions, they starved very quickly, or so she claimed.

And here was another astonishing and wonderful thing: to watch Harefolk Hunter munching happily was to feel one's own heart at peace. And here was another still: Each time she scratched her fur, which she did quite frequently, bits of downy fluff would shake loose and float through the air, helping Priestess forget her melancholy.

"Wow, that fur is great..."

"Yeah, if ye live up in the mountains. Down here it's so flaming hot, this stuff is a liability. I'm tryin' to shed it, and you wouldn't believe how it itches."

And indeed, they could see that the young lady's white fur was changing in patches to brown.

I see—it'll be summer soon.

Priestess realized then that she had been denying herself even the time to think such thoughts as that, and she looked up at the sky. The great, vast blue was filled with gleaming sunlight, shining down so brightly she had to squint to look up.

High Elf Archer, when she saw Priestess like that, sniffed triumphantly and puffed out her modest chest. "We're going on a grand adventure now," she said, though she then smiled wanly. "Even if it is goblin hunting."

"Oh, are ye really, now? Shame, shame about that. Well, we'll just see y'again sometime, I think." It was hard to say how serious the young woman's rather craggy pronouncement was. Priestess, though, suspected the harefolk was being genuine and found her heart ever so slightly lighter.

Call me innocent, but...

She felt a little bit exasperated with her own self over the matter.

"Hey, you, c'mon over here! We'll make sure you're ready to go!" Rookie Warrior called.

"You got it!" Harefolk Hunter grinned and shouted back. She obligingly went bounding off, but then she stopped and spun back. "Ah, right, the good sister was asking for you."

“Wha—?” Priestess failed to come up with an answer immediately. The truth was, she should have gone to see Sister Grape straightaway. Harefolk Hunter hardly seemed to notice her consternation as she waved and exclaimed, “G’bye, then!”

High Elf Archer sighed pointedly, then put on her best older-sister voice, her ears twitching up and down. “Go on; go see her. I’ve got other things to do, you know.” She gave Priestess a push to get her started, the girl wobbling unsteadily before weaving past other adventurers.

That was one adventurer with an ax on his shoulder—he wore a rank tag of Emerald, the sixth rank—who had brought his whole party. Behind him came a warlock in battered outerwear and a monk in threadbare vestments. The warlock was irritably flipping the pages of a spell book, repeating something in a mutter. Probably struggling to remember the incantation of the day’s chosen spell. The warlock gave a click of the tongue at the noise of the bustle around.

The ax wielder who appeared to be the party’s leader paid the warlock no mind; in fact, he nearly drowned out the sound of annoyance as he bellowed, “Yo there! Was yours the party that’s been handling this? Going to roll right on with the quest?”

“Not us,” High Elf Archer said, smiling proudly. “We’re going on an adventure now.”

“That’d make us the highest rank around, then...” The ax wielder sighed loudly as if to indicate what a burden this was, but it didn’t seem to take him long to feel better.

“Great,” High Elf Archer said, “we’ll leave it to you to keep an eye on things here.”

“You can count on us. Though I’m not sure there’s much you need to count on us *for*, job like this...”

Priestess turned away from the conversation and pattered off into the temple with which she was so familiar. She bowed to acquaintances—other clerics, other

adventurers—as they passed by. She tried not to hurry, not to fret. And yet, still she wished that the time until she arrived would be either an instant or an eternity—either would do. As it was, the time was too long not to think about anything, yet too short for her to really sort out how she was feeling. Thoughts, disconnected from each other, raced through her head, until they spun away from each other and floated off.

Many different people had said many different things to her. Many different people were doing many different things.

So what am I doing, then?

The world was incalculably vast and complex and too full of places she couldn't see. Most of those places she would never go to, never know of. But if the stage called the world was so large, how much larger must it be backstage, from which they were separated by only a thin curtain. Or what if it should be the case that this "stage" was only such to her, when in fact it was really—

—backstage.

She thought she had fully understood this.

Had she believed she could do something? Just a little girl who had heard a whisper from the gods.

How many clerics were there in the world who could bring about miracles?

She had helped to resolve more than a few adventures. Very well, so what?

She had grown a little. And?

It was a step so small it didn't even cover a single square of this board.

Did you seriously think you—you!—could do anything?

Priestess, who had been feeling lighter and clearer, gradually started growing heavier and slower again.

"Goodness, I'm about to cry," she realized distantly. She bit her lip and forced herself to face forward. But then...

"Hey. Gosh, what in the world is the matter? You look

terrible.”

“Oh...”

The nun, who had been looking all over for her, smiled like the sun emerging in the sky. She reached out a dark hand and placed it gently on Priestess’s cheek, almost stroking it.

“Eeyeep?!” Priestess yelped as the other woman pinched her face and gave it a firm shake. The source of her tears changed completely, and Priestess gave a high, keening wail, realizing how silly and how embarrassing she looked.

Next, the nun tugged Priestess’s face up and down, chuckling, “Heh-heh-heh, hee-hee-hee!” as she did so. Sister Grape finally let go when it became evident that Priestess was quaking with anger, but then she shrugged instead. “Smile, girl, smile. There’s only one time when a mighty cleric ought to be going around looking like the world is ending, and that’s when the world is ending.”

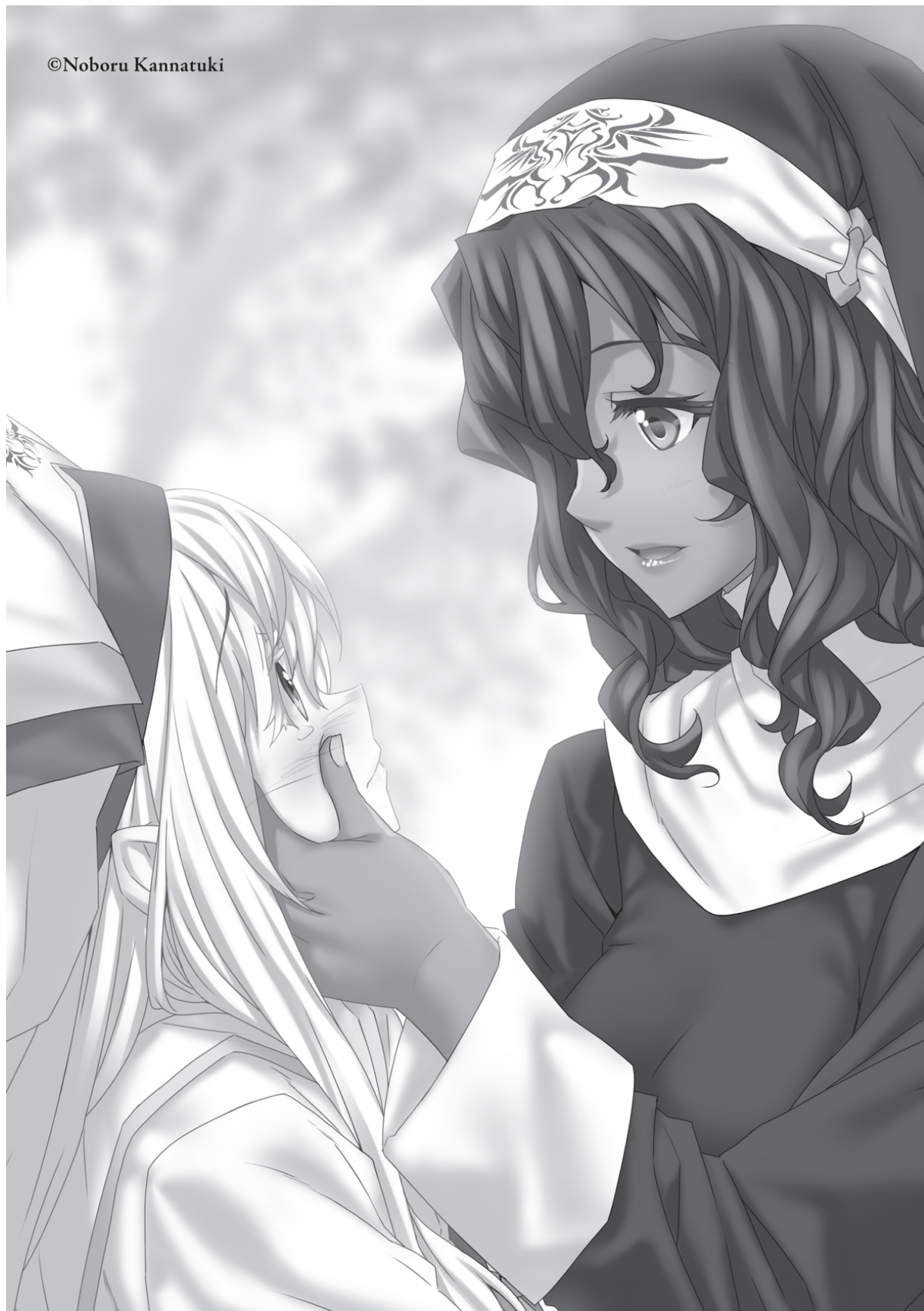
“H-how am I supposed to smile when you’re hurting me...?!”

“At least you’re not stuck in your own head anymore, eh?” Sister Grape said, grinning, and Priestess didn’t have a response.

For crying out loud.

She had been struggling to figure out what to say when she saw Sister Grape, but everything she had thought of had flown right out of her head, along with her worries. In the end, what finally came out was an honest question. “... How can you be so bright and cheerful?” Even if the question was asked with a pouty lower lip stuck out.

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"That's a good question. I wonder..." Sister Grape truly seemed to not know, even though it was her own self they were talking about.

Maybe it was wash day: Sister Grape sat down (rather gracelessly) on a barrel next to a basket into which many a vestment had been tossed. Kicking her legs, she cast her eyes around the temple grounds, then looked up at the blue sky. "Probably...because I know."

"Know what...?"

Sister Grape smiled and gave her "little sister" a proficient wink. "That I'm *not* any goblin's daughter."

"So let others make idiots of themselves jabbering if they want! They don't know anything—they just talk, talk, talk. That's all it is." She smiled.

"There's something else, too. You can worry, or you can rage, or you can cry—but you'll still get hungry in time, and if someone tickles you, you'll still laugh. *So you're best off just enjoying yourself—and it's the moral way, too.*"

"..."

Priestess didn't understand. She didn't understand, but it seemed like something very, very simple somehow. For it had been piling up and piling up, ever since she could remember.

Sister Grape leaned over on her barrel to look Priestess in the face. The young woman blinked and found herself confronted with eyes that could have sucked her in. She drew breath.

"You remember the teachings of our goddess. Remind me of the most important one?"

"Yes, *ma'am*." Priestess nodded. There wasn't an ounce of hesitation. "Protect, heal, save."

"*Very good.*" Sister Grape grinned. Her smile was as beautiful and untroubled as a clear sky; it sprang from a sincerely happy heart. "If you ever feel lost, just follow that teaching. Who cares what anybody says? We have the goddess on our side!"

“...Yes, ma’am.” Priestess nodded again. “Yes, ma’am!” She nodded more firmly.

“Then follow the path straight and true!”

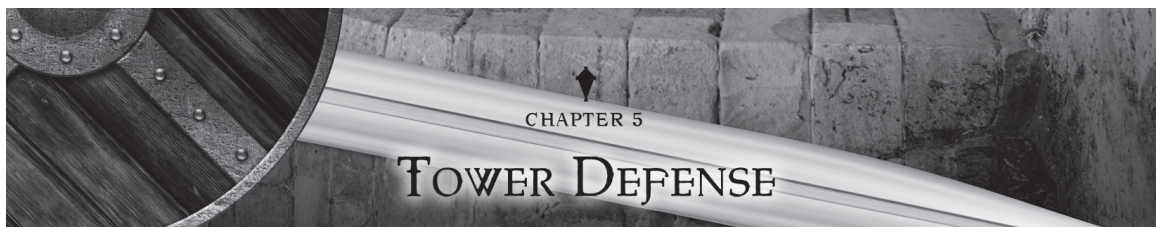
“Yes, ma’am! I will! I’m off to my adventure now.” She nodded again, even more emphatically, and then raced away. Her sounding staff was jangling as she turned half around, holding her cap to her head, and bowed. “Um!” She wasn’t certain what to say but “Thank you—very much!”

“You’ve got it backward.” *That should be my line.*

Priestess bowed once again to her amused older sister and then started off.

She had worries. She had hesitations. But she no longer cared about them. What she had to do and how to do it: She had learned those things long, long ago and had gotten this far by putting them into use. Maybe it was something she had simply become accustomed to, but she was certain now.

This path she walked must be what people called faith.



“Well, well, Beard-cutter. You showed admirable restraint,” Dwarf Shaman said with a smirk, his voice nearly lost in the clattering of the carriage’s wheels along the ruts in the flagstone.

Goblin Slayer’s metal helmet moved slightly. He had set up shop inside the carriage and was silently working away. He offered only a thoughtful “Hmm,” though he then added in his usual dispassionate tone, “It was necessary.” A blunt response. It was a mystery how well he grasped the meaning behind the dwarf’s words.

Dwarf Shaman watched the scenery go by outside the curtain as he drank some wine from a gourd at his hip with a *glug*, and let out a breath with an *ahhh*. “Rumors of a goblin’s daughter? Would’ve expected you to go charging straight in, I have to say.”

“She’s merely descended from a dark-skinned people,” Goblin Slayer said shortly. The helmet turned pointedly toward Dwarf Shaman, the gaze hidden behind the visor settling on his beard. “And the quest giver is the wine merchant’s son. Not a goblin.”

Dwarf Shaman guffawed, quite satisfied with the reply, and in the corner, Priestess’s cheeks softened into a small smile.

High Elf Archer, watching them, produced an elaborate shrug. “But it all works out to the same thing: goblin hunting, *again*. Gods, I get so bored sticking with you, Orcbolg.”

“Is that so?”

“That was sarcasm.”

“...Is that so?”

This murmur was accompanied by a brief pause in his work, but he quickly resumed. He was grinding something black with a mortar, like an alchemist. High Elf Archer, who might normally have been inspecting the work with curiosity, gave a couple of sniffs and frowned. Then she waved a hand as if to make it clear just how uninterested she was.

Dwarf Shaman, ignoring her, took another drink. “Eh, in the end, an adventurer’s just a club.”

“A club?” Priestess said.

“I should say so,” Dwarf Shaman replied, stroking his white beard.

Priestess was almost too flummoxed to say anything more, but Lizard Priest chose to fill the gap. “And what makes you say that, Master Shaman?” He uncoiled his long neck, and Dwarf Shaman nodded.

“Because in every place and time, the last resort for solving a problem is to hit it as hard as you can. Up to that point, you might try politeness, might work your way through different problems, but when things get bad... Then it’s us they call on.”

Lizard Priest nodded in agreement. “Since the creation of all things, violence has ever been the preferred solution to problems.”

Priestess offered a tight smile and chose not to respond directly. “Do you...really think so?”

“Of course, it is not true of *every* situation,” the lizardman replied with a significant tone very fitting for a monk. “However, after gathering information, convening a council of war, and reaching general agreement...”

“Then there’s usually just one conclusion, and that means it’s time to go charging in!” Dwarf Shaman said, and he and Lizard Priest both began laughing uproariously. Their mirth shook the curtain and left Priestess at a loss for how to respond. At length she settled for offering a “Sorry” to the

driver and left it at it.

She wondered, though, at the way even this simple exchange buoyed her heart.

Maybe it's because I'm finally back.

This was hardly the first time she'd operated without the others. And it really wasn't so many days since she had last adventured with all of them, if she counted it up. But...yes, *to come back* was certainly the right expression. Everyone else was chatting and enjoying themselves; she was there but with a disturbed expression on her face. It was really quite comfortable, and in order to hide the fit of embarrassment, Priestess contrived to let out a little mumble: "Gosh, really..."

"This is the sort of thing that makes people assume dwarves *and* lizardmen have a few screws loose," High Elf Archer said to Priestess. *Don't let them bother you.* Her ears flicked in the direction of the curtain. "Hey, I see something—is that the place?"

Goblin Slayer moved calmly to where the elf was leaning to look out. He stuck his helmeted head out, past the curtain, turning in the direction they were going.

I see; so that's it.

Beyond a copse of small trees, built on top of an imposing hill so it appeared to glare down upon them, was a mansion. Yes, they had said the merchant ran quite a profitable business. The house looked brand-new, a spectacular building.

Goblin Slayer grunted as he looked up at the house, then asked flatly, "What do you think?"

"I think I'm not the person you usually ask that question," High Elf Archer replied. *Not that I care.* She likewise looked outside, her ears twitching. "Vineyards to the west. That's why the house is here. There's a slope down from the mansion, then a river to the east..."

"A river?"

"I can hear water," High Elf Archer said as if this should

have been patently obvious.

"Hmm," Goblin Slayer responded, digging through his pouch and producing a map.

It was a sketch of the immediate area, of course. They would have to investigate themselves to get the finer details of the terrain, but—ah yes, there was the river. To the east, indeed. It ran into the water town as well, a branch of the river on which they had traveled south to the elf homeland.

"Anyway, if they're gonna show up, I bet it'll be from the west," High Elf Archer said, ducking back into the carriage as Goblin Slayer studied the map. The elf felt that this was not really her job. She was happy to improvise once she saw what things were like on the ground; she didn't think too hard before she got there.

"Would the vineyards not make for a good position?"

"Position?" she repeated dumbly, caught off guard by the question. Then she said, "Ohh, like a strategic position," as the meaning sunk in. She nodded. "Good question. I think the goblins are too short for it to make much difference."

"I see..."

The grapevines were kept trimmed and arranged in neat rows to allow for work to go on. *Almost like the teeth of a comb*, Goblin Slayer thought. If there was a road prepared for them, could the goblins be expected to march stupidly straight down it?

"...We won't be able to use fire," he reflected.

"Course not!" someone said, and "Of course we can't!" said someone else. But who had spoken?

Goblin Slayer cleared the doubts from his head and watched the scenery flow by. He was surprised by the humanlike figure he saw standing on the grounds. At first, he took it for a guard or perhaps a servant, but it wasn't. Armed with a weapon and capped with a helmet, it was a hastily built scarecrow.

Such things might have some use in the night, but in the day, they were largely meaningless. And to goblins, night

was day.

Would it throw the goblins off or put them on their guard? Goblin Slayer considered it for a moment, then shook his head. Neither would serve much purpose. The assault would come in early evening. That was how goblins were. And once they were on the attack, they never imagined that they could lose.

Then again, many adventurers were the same way.

§

“You’re here! From the bottom of my heart, I thank you for coming...!”

When the party disembarked from the carriage, they were greeted by the wine merchant’s son, who had returned a bit ahead of them. When they followed him through the door, however, what they discovered was a complete betrayal of their expectations.

“Hrk...”

“Well now... My goodness...”

Goblin Slayer stopped in the doorway, while beside him Dwarf Shaman spoke quite in spite of himself.

The yard had been neatly kept, along with the winding pathway through it, and then there was the thick oaken door. But when they entered the salon that formed the front of the house, they found it a wreck. Bare lumber and building materials could be seen around, and the walls were repainted but only partway. One corner of the room was occupied by discarded furniture, which had been abandoned with only a large cloth over it to keep the dust off. Priestess wasn’t sure whether the place was in the process of being built or falling apart.

“So you’re...still working on it?” she finally asked.

“I said we couldn’t worry about reputation anymore, but we wanted the outside to look nice at least,” the merchant’s

son answered. "My father hired a carpenter to refurbish the place, but he ran off on us."

"Gaaaah! An awful thing, this." Cut wood and carved stone, as opposed to raw wood and untouched stone, were the province of the dwarves. The shaman was incensed. He looked like an elf confronted with a brutally hacked-down forest—and probably felt like one, too. His face was the picture of gloom, and his voice was thick with compassion for this house, which had been unable to fulfill its role. "Waste of a good building..."

"But convenient for us," Goblin Slayer said, putting a hand to one poorly assembled wall. He seemed pleased to discover just how thin it was. "We'll punch through the walls. There will be many foes to face. With this as a base, it will be best if we can access the interior easily."

"What, planning to turn this place into a fortress?" Dwarf Shaman said, half joking and half concerned.

"No," Goblin Slayer replied, shaking his head. "A branch castle."

"Mm, a time-tested tactic for defensive engagements," Lizard Priest said, making his typical strange hands-together gesture. The lizardman knew more of battle than any other race in this party and could become quite loquacious when it came to strategy and tactics. He waved his long tail, his tongue darting in and out of his mouth, as he looked Goblin Slayer in the face. "It is difficult to say what the forces of Chaos may want here, but I doubt it is simply control or conquest."

"Are goblins capable of thinking that much in the first place?"

"Not they, perhaps, but those above them. Thus, we may be able to guess their aim."

"Hmm," Goblin Slayer mused and considered. What was here? "The grapes and the wine. And the building."

"Yes, supplies they may obtain through this theft. But I think stealing provisions was only incidental to their main

objective.”

“The water town... A beachhead, is that what you would call this?”

“Most likely. But I doubt even that is their primary goal. This operation has many facets. Meaning—”

The two of them put their heads together, speaking of battle with familiarity. As the ideas flew, it was all Priestess could do to keep up with them. It was intimidating, but inexperienced as she was, even a conversation like this was a valuable lesson for her.

I have to say my piece, though.

“Um,” she said with a sweet little cough, drawing the piercing gazes of the two discussers. Even though she was blushing red from the attention, Priestess hesitantly put a hand in the air. “Shouldn’t we run that sort of thing by the quest giver first...?”

“...Hrk.”

“A wise notion.”

Goblin Slayer just grunted, and Lizard Priest rolled his eyes merrily in his head. High Elf Archer, who had been listening to the conversation without much interest, tried to suppress a laugh, but there was still a soft, bell-like chuckle.

Dwarf Shaman could only sigh at the scene, and he turned to the quest giver. “You heard ’em. All right by you, sir?”

“Yes, it’s quite all right.”

The answer came before the wine merchant’s son could speak, from the top of the staircase that reached up out of the main room. The voice was like a tightly stretched bowstring, and it belonged to an elderly woman.

She wore clothing that was less fancy or elegant than it was simply restrained, and her ash-gray hair was tied high on her head. She must once have been a robust beauty, but now she was thin and wasted, attended by the passage of many years. She showed no shame in this, though, as she descended the staircase with sure steps—and that very

forcefulness was her beauty now.

Priestess swallowed and sat up straighter. The old woman seemed to accept even that gesture as a matter of course.

"There is only one thing left to the honor of this house; all else is trivial."

"Mother..."

"Quiet, child." The woman's voice was full of age, but her words were strong. She fixed a sharp, very much appraising eye on the adventurers, looking from one to the next. "Our family may fall to its knees, but it will never fail to rise." Perhaps that was what gave her such conviction even in these trying times.

Is this what it means to have a way of life? To have style?

Priestess thought of the words she'd heard in that den of rogues. She still only dimly understood them.

"As it is in business, so it shall be in war. I expect you to earn your rewards, adventurers." The old woman gave an elegant bow, then disappeared upstairs, almost gliding away. She didn't make so much as a footstep, no doubt explaining how she had entered without their noticing.

"Man, you humans are fascinating." High Elf Archer grinned from beside Priestess. There was just a hint of admiration in her voice. "I've gotta show that *kid* my best side, considering I'm older than her."

"But *she's* certainly a lot older than *me*," Priestess said—and that, to her, seemed like a reason to make sure she acted in a way she could be proud of.

The woman had told them to earn their rewards. That was, in its own way, an expression of trust in them. And trust was just as valuable as a bag of battered old coins the village headman had collected or the gold produced by a merchant from his safe.

To have a father, to have a mother, to have a child, to have friends, to have work, to live life day by day.

I'm pretty sure that's what it means... Right?

Priestess directed the silent question at no one in particular—perhaps at the Earth Mother in heaven. Of course, no answer was forthcoming. But that was just fine.

“Anyway, let Orcbolg and his buddies worry about the details.” High Elf Archer was suddenly all easy amusement. *“I just shoot things.”*

“Now just a minute, Long-Ears. When we’re this shorthanded, even an anvil can be pressed into service.” There was a sound of objection (*“Bah!”*), which Dwarf Shaman summarily ignored as he turned to the wine merchant’s son. “One more time, sir—how do you want to handle this?”

“My mother gave her approval,” the boy said with a pained smile. “Who am I to contradict her?”

“Then it’s settled.” Goblin Slayer nodded. And he immediately started calculating in his mind. All of them were with him. And his hand was in his pocket. He felt a wave of gratitude for all of this. “I will let you decide which walls to break through and which to leave. Make it easy to get in and out.”

“I’m your man. But we still have that problem I mentioned about being shorthanded.” Dwarf Shaman sounded less than pleased. All they had, he explained, was one anvil. (*“Pretty soon we’re gonna have one dead dwarf!”* High Elf Archer threatened with a shake of her fist.) Then they were off and arguing, and Priestess realized how long it felt since she had last seen this familiar scene.

She was just deciding whether and how to intervene when Goblin Slayer nodded again. “I wish to borrow any servants who are still here and any leftover timber and tools. Whatever we use, you may deduct the cost from our reward.”

“All right. There isn’t much left, but a few of our servants have been good enough to stay with us. Reliable people.” There was a note of pride in the young man’s voice amid the self-recrimination. “They’re at your disposal—as am I. Do

with them as you see fit. You're a specialist, right?"

"I suppose." Goblin Slayer nodded again. *Goblin Slayer*. It was something like five, six, seven years now since they had started calling him that. No one could match the time he had spent hunting goblins.

You're stupid and a fool and have no luck, so make sure you think when you act! That's what his teacher had told him.

"In that case, please bring me the person who said they saw the goblin tracks. I wish to confirm it for myself."

"Yes, sir. Right away."

Then, after a few more conversations, Goblin Slayer began to act.

High Elf Archer, Lizard Priest, Dwarf Shaman, and Priestess each moved to fulfill their respective roles. Time was short, hands were few, enemies were many, there was much to defend—and failure was not an option.

The situation was dire. But Goblin Slayer was calm.

After all, that was how it always was.

§

Maids pattered this way and that, while servers rushed about. All who were left, the high and the low, cooks and serfs and everyone else, threw themselves into their work. The great, empty house rang with the sound of construction tools, life returning to the halls once again. It might have been an inspiring scene—if one didn't think about why it was occurring.

"This 'ere's the tracks I saw," the old servant man, leaning on a rusty spear in lieu of a staff, told Goblin Slayer. "The demons' magic sent me flying," he said, tapping his wooden leg with a smile on his wrinkled face. "But the master and mistress were kind enough to give me a job here, y'see. Wouldn't be much of a man if I didn't repay

them as they deserved.”

“I see.” With a quick nod, Goblin Slayer crouched down to inspect the indicated patch of earth.

They were at the far-off path that wound its way among the vines near the house. The leaves and branches of the almost treelike vines twined overhead, and he could just make out hideous footprints among the dappled shadows. As he counted them up from behind his visor, he suddenly thought of spring two years before.

There had been more of them then.

“Are the tracks left every day?”

“Nay, just once, good sir. Ever since we put up that scarecrow, the little devils have kept their distance.”

“But things progressed enough that you called adventurers.”

“Well, surely we did.” The old man’s face, no doubt worthy of a warrior once, was tight as he nodded. “Goblin scouts, they were. That lot, you get in their way, they’ll come charging in just to get you back.”

“Yes.”

That is certainly true.

Goblins considered it only natural that others should be attacked by them, stolen from by them. To be interrupted in these pursuits clearly angered them; they saw it as an affront. So there would certainly be an assault, just as he had imagined. So far as it went, nothing was unusual.

The issue was that scarecrow.

Goblin Slayer stood and looked at it in the slanting light of the sun. It had a weapon in his hand, wore a helmet and armor, a brave warrior to keep away goblins and crows—a warrior stuffed with straw.

The goblins could see at night, and if they got close enough, they would most likely realize what it was—so how good was their vision, exactly? From far enough away, would they look and think that the makings of a great army awaited them?

They didn't erase their footprints. That suggests their leader is a goblin as well.

If they were really serving as foot soldiers for the forces of Chaos, they would have been given some kind of equipment. There was always the possibility they would attempt some trickery; he had to be prepared.

"...I wish to see the river as well."

"Yessir. Go around back and down the slope, and you'll be right there."

"The slope?"

"A levee, you might call it. The master several generations ago built it up alongside the river."

I see. Goblin Slayer nodded and stood. The sun filtering through the vines was turning red, so it looked like he was showered in a rain of blood. *Hmph*, Goblin Slayer snorted, and then from his item pack, he pulled out the pouch he had been working with in the carriage. "This is something I prepared. Please put one of them in the middle of each of the farm roads." He gave the bag to the servant, then after a moment's thought said, "You may get someone to help you."

"Heh, even I could handle this work alone, sir. Leave it to me." The old man grinned, then walked away with the bag. A short distance away, though, he stopped. "Ah, sir, what d'ye plan to do about the scarecrow? Shall we pull it up?"

"No," Goblin Slayer said after a moment. "Leave it there."

"Yessir."

Goblin Slayer watched the old man go, then turned his helmet.

In the end, in the grand scheme of things, this was a tiny battle. An unimportant struggle over a miniscule corner of the game board. The enemy were merely foot soldiers of the force of Chaos, and they themselves were only adventurers. No doubt the players up in heaven were interested in bigger things as they rolled their dice.

Whether he won or lost here, the scales of heaven would change but little.

“But what do I care?”

If there was some problem with any of this, Goblin Slayer didn’t know what it was.

§

“G-good work, everyone!” seemed to be Priestess’s constant refrain as she rushed through the house. She knew nothing of carpentry and wasn’t suited for prolonged bouts of physical labor. High Elf Archer had a handle on watching the perimeter, and when it came to the daily life of the house, the servants knew more than Priestess did.

That left just one thing to do. Priestess covered her hair with a cloth, put on an apron, washed her hands, and stood in the kitchen wielding a knife. One thing she was quite accustomed to from her days at the Temple of the Earth Mother was making food for many mouths.

Something like stew would not be suited for work like this; there was no time to stop and eat. Happily, ingredients were plentiful. More than enough to fill the stomachs of everyone in the house.

All right, then.

She appropriated old bread to use as plates, loaded it with other ingredients, put another piece of bread on top, and cut it roughly. She wasn’t sure what they would all make of sandwiches, these not being typical fare for nobles or merchants, but—

“At least they can eat them while they work...!”

She bowed and thanked the maids helping her in the kitchen, then gave each one a basket.

At any given time, there was something that every person could do. At this exact moment, Priestess felt this was all she could offer, and indeed she was right.

Dwarf Shaman, who had been busy giving instructions to the various servants, grinned and promptly began to share the food around. Lizard Priest, who had been carrying timber, rolled his eyes happily, gulping down a sandwich with cheese on it in a single bite.

High Elf Archer jumped down lightly from the roof, took a sandwich with a quick “Thanks!” and bounded back up.

Thank you were indeed the words on everybody’s lips, from the maids to the manservants to the old man with the wooden leg. It made Priestess very happy. It was very encouraging to be of help.

She pattered from room to room, finally arriving at the innermost chamber.

She swallowed. Took a deep breath. Her small chest rose and fell as she knocked.

“You may come in.” The voice was clear and commanding.

“P-pardon me very much, then,” Priestess said and opened the door.

Inside were shelves lined with the biggest books Priestess had ever seen in her life. Perhaps this place was a study.

Priestess looked around, a bit overwhelmed, entering the room as quietly as possible. The wine merchant’s son sat at a massive writing desk, jotting something down, while the old woman was seated in a chair, a book open in front of her. She didn’t look up as Priestess approached but said sharply, “Ah, this is that food—the one they say is so popular with that noble who loved to gamble.”

“Mother...” The young man stopped writing. He stood up and went over to Priestess, thanking her with a bow. “We have our own battles to fight. We should be grateful for provisions.”

Perhaps the remark was directed at his mother. “I know that,” the elderly woman replied testily.

“That noble was very diligent, no fooling around

whatsoever," she added. "This should be just fine to eat while you work."

Priestess considered for a beat, then decided to reply simply, "Yes." She didn't want to shame these people by bursting their carefully constructed facade. "Things are going according to plan," she continued. "I'm sorry, I know it's a little noisy..."

"Battle is a noisy thing," the young man said. He took a sandwich from the basket and bit into it with a smile and a remark of, "Ahh, that's good!" It was not a very refined moment for him, but it was also heartfelt, and it somehow suited him.

"But, sir... Battle?" Priestess said, tilting her head.

"For what follows," the wine merchant's son replied. "Last wills and testaments, just in case the worst should happen. Strategies we can follow if we survive. There's always much to do before a fight."

If you put your all into a fight and won, well and good, but if you spent yourself so much in the battle that you didn't survive the aftermath, it defeated the point. Think ahead, then further ahead, then further still: That was just what businessmen did.

"My goodness, but this truly is tasty. Won't you try one, Mother?"

"One needs more than victory in battle to survive. Thank you for your effort," the old woman said at length. She didn't deign to touch the food while Priestess was present, but she at least had this word of appreciation in the end.

"Th-think nothing of it!" Priestess replied, smiling, and she politely bowed her head and withdrew from the room.

When the door was safely shut behind her, she breathed a sigh of relief. Everyone, each and every one of them, whosoever they were, was doing what they could. That included her and the two in that room. Each simply doing what was most obvious for them to do. It had been only a brief time since the answer had emerged, yet now she

laughed to remember what trivial things she had worried about.

When Goblin Slayer gets back from his patrol, I'll make sure he eats, too.

As she went about with thoughts like these, the sun set and night came before she knew it.

And then the moment finally arrived.

§

The twin moons and the stars looked down on the horizon, from beyond which came an unsettling pounding of drums. The little dark shadows they assumed were coming could not be seen from their vantage point on the second floor of the mansion; the enemy was hidden by the stubby foliage of the vineyard.

High Elf Archer twitched her ears, bracing one foot against the improvised crenellation where the window frame had been hacked away to provide a hole through which she could shoot. "They're out there—a lot of them. Just goblins...I think, but I hear armor rattling."

"As we expected."

"Wish they would've surprised us."

"I agree."

Goblin Slayer gave High Elf Archer, who had her great bow at the ready, a gentle pat on the shoulder, then moved to one side almost as if he was gliding. The wall had been smashed through to provide easy ingress and egress, while the resultant debris had been cleared aside so it wouldn't get in the way.

The director of all this work had been none other than Dwarf Shaman, now crouched before the arrow port. He held his bag of catalysts close as he gazed out over the battlefield. At his feet lay a pile of ammunition: shards of a broken brick. He took a swig of wine, wiped the droplets

from his beard, and laughed with his typical amusement. "Right now, Beard-cutter. Mind you don't slip up."

"Our first moves need to be in concert. I'll leave the timing to you."

"You got it. We've been at this together for two years."

Two years for a human. Two years for dwarf. Two years for an elf and a lizardman. How much difference there was between all those two years, Goblin Slayer did not know.

When he said nothing, Dwarf Shaman cackled again. Goblin Slayer left the room with that sound still echoing behind him.

Doors that had formerly blocked off rooms from one another or separated rooms from the hallway had all been detached and were now leaning against various walls. In a worst-case scenario, they might have to go to ground inside the house. The doors would make useful shields in a pinch.

In the hallway, beside the doors stood the servants, all looking thoroughly alarmed, armed with a motley array of weapons. *Weapons*, in fact, might have been a generous term; with the exception of some swords and spears pulled from a storehouse, many of the servants were armed only with slingshots or with small bows such as were used for hunting. If the battle reached these people, it would truly be the end—death might be the best outcome they could hope for.

Goblin Slayer spotted the old soldier from earlier among the assembled men and women and nodded at him. "What's your status?"

"I handed everything out. Don't worry y'self!"

"Have a few people watch the river as well. You never know."

"This isn't my first war. I know what to do."

His bravado suited a soldier. He edged over to an arrow port and stared out at the river.

Goblin Slayer looked at him and the other servants, then quickly descended the stairs.

It's important to see things for oneself, to confirm with one's own eyes.

Was that something his master had taught him or something he had learned in the course of his adventures? Or perhaps Heavy Warrior had said it. When one became a party leader or the commander of an army, it behooved him to consider how to give his comrades peace of mind. Thus, he must not become frantic or show panic. Not fear, either. Nor excitement or agitation.

Goblin Slayer had never been so thankful for his helmet as he was this day. He had no confidence that he could present such a front. How must he look to Priestess? And his other companions? Guild Girl kept pointing out that he was a Silver-ranked adventurer. But what was that?

But I am Goblin Slayer.

That was how he, keenly aware of the rank tag dangling at his neck, defined himself: just a few short words. He was Goblin Slayer, and this was a goblin hunt. He had only to do exactly that. It was what he was good at.

"Goblin Slayer, sir!" As he arrived at the front entrance, he was met by Priestess, jogging out of the kitchen. She had discarded her apron and traded the cloth over her hair for her usual cap, and in her hands was her sounding staff. "The goblins...!"

"I know," he said with a nod. A perfectly typical gesture for him. "Is everything ready?"

"Yes, sir!" she responded, and in a complete change from the past several days, she looked bright and happy. Her expression was of course tinged with anxiety at the forthcoming fight with the goblins, but she was clearly different.

Hmph, truly hopeless, this person.

"...? Is something the matter?" Priestess asked.

"No," Goblin Slayer replied with a shake of his head. He turned toward the front door. "You remember the arrangements?"

"Yes, I've got it!"

"Good, then."

For all the detached doors and broken window frames in the house, this front door alone they had left in place. If the house was a branch castle, this was the castle gate. If it came to it, they could even bar the door. Lizard Priest stood beside this great oaken slab, the key to their defense, with his arms crossed and looking positively like he was enjoying himself. "Ahem, now, milord Goblin Slayer. This is the moment of truth—do you need more soldiers?"

"We don't have enough people, but I wish to leave some spells available."

"Understood, of course." Lizard Priest swung his long neck from side to side, worked his claws, and generally limbered up his body. On reflection, of late he had not—either on the snowy mountain or among the zombies—had a chance to simply tear an enemy limb from limb on level ground. Goblin Slayer wasn't sure how much that might pain a lizardman.

"What do you think?"

What really mattered was that this giant was the most experienced military strategist of the party. Knowing that, it was easy to trust their lives to him, though he bore no more elaborate title.

"Well, now," Lizard Priest said, rolling his eyes in his head. "If all goes as intended, I should think it will be very much business as usual."

"I see."

"However, a battlefield such as this may produce certain surprises..." Lizard Priest spoke with calm composure that suggested an old hand at battle, then he made his strange palms-together gesture. "The two of you should best think, not of killing, but rather of surviving. I believe that would also improve the results of this combat."

"All right," Priestess responded. She hadn't expected her voice to have quite such a squeak, and she put a hand to

her mouth, her face reddening.

"A difficult proposition," Goblin Slayer grumbled. "I have no intention of sending any of them home alive." Then he placed both hands on the great oaken door. He shoved it open, the door scraping audibly along the floor.

In the end, it was no different from delving into a cave. Or meeting the goblins as they assaulted a village. Having reached this moment, he saw that Dwarf Shaman had been right: He had been uncommonly measured.

And the things he couldn't do himself, he had entrusted to the run.

All this behavior could hardly be said to be very adventurer-like. But neither did it resemble a rogue. For his part, he believed that he fully accepted who and what he was. Everything he had done, he brought to this situation. That being the case, there was one thing to do. He didn't need to ask anyone else.

But just the same, Goblin Slayer said it out loud. His words were as sharp as a dagger in the night as the twin moons gleamed down. His voice was as cold as the wind blowing through a cave in the depths of the earth.

"We're going to kill all the goblins."

§

"GOOROGGOORG!!"

"GOORGB!! GBBOORGBB!!"

They were emaciated and dried-out. Their feverish starvation could only be sated here, here alone, they were sure; they had no doubts.

If nothing else, these bastards had reneged on a contract with them. That was what the high and mighty visitors had said. So the goblins could beat them, hurt them, stomp on them, kill and rape them, and they had no right to complain. Let them weep and apologize, there would be no

forgiveness—and if they died, it only proved their weakness.

This spear-wielding straw man they put up, a silly little trick, showed their foolishness.

“GBOOOGGB!!”

“GOGB!!”

The goblins cackled as they kicked down the scarecrow standing watch over the vineyard. They spat on it, tore it apart, then jumped up and down on top of it.

Here was an idea! Whoever they caught, they would spear on this stick, and set *them* up at the entrance to the forest. Then the humans would know that these grapes and these vines and everything here belonged to the goblins. Those humans seemed to think the vines were theirs, but they were wrong, wrong, wrong!

“GOROOGBB! GOBR...?”

Then one goblin who had been lost in these vicious fantasies suddenly shook. He stumbled, feeling like the sky and the ground were switching places, and then he collapsed.

The earth, of course, had not budged; it was the goblin who had tumbled. He didn’t know it when his companions around him started to fall down one after another, too. He had no idea when an arrow from afar pierced his spinal cord and ended his life as easily as if he were drifting off to a dream. There was no pain, no suffering—it was an awfully good death for a goblin. From that perspective at least, the hail of arrows that came in from a strange angle was a great mercy indeed.

It was not so, though, for the goblins watching from a distance.

“GOROGB?!”

“GGBB?!”

Magic! This is magic!

The goblins began gibbering in agitation. These cheaters, giving themselves an advantage.

Wrapped in smoke, shot through by arrows, the goblins

drew back down the road in a rush.

This didn't really mean anything. The guys who got shot were just idiots. *If we take a different path—*

"GOR? GOOGB?!"

But even then, the goblins could see one road after another being cut off by ribbons of smoke. Magic smoke everywhere. But they were learning. If they stayed out of the smoke, they would be fine.

"GOOROGB!!"

"GRRB! OOBOGRR!!"

With clubs and hatchets to hand, the goblins pressed down the one road that had no smoke. They would never, ever forgive the son of a bitch who'd pulled this. They would break every bone in his body, drag him around by the hair, jab a spear up his ass, and put him on display.

The goblins were angry.

Their tiny heads were completely full of anger and hatred—in other words, everything was as normal.

And so everything went as usual once the goblin hunt began.

§

"Ugh, Orcbolg has the nastiest ideas," High Elf Archer grumbled as she loose one arrow after another through the port in the second floor, each one loaded with embers.

Long ears twitching, she read the night air, her bolts flying true to their destination on the footpath between the vineyards. There, a simple fuse awaited, easily evident to a high elf's eyes.

"I got it burning, just like you said. But what's all that smoke?"

"A smoke screen created with a combination of dried wolf dung, sulfur, wood ash, pine needles, and reeds," Dwarf Shaman informed the irritated elf as he took a swig of wine.

This was a wine merchant's house, after all, and he had said *everything* was at their disposal. Dwarf Shaman needed enough energy and focus to control his spells, true—but as far as the alcohol that was his catalyst, there was an endless supply of it, and a dwarf with wine is invincible.

Dwarf Shaman began to weave his spell with an energetic exhortation to the sprites around him: *"Drink deep, sing loud, let the spirits lead you! Sing loud, step quick, and when to sleep they see you, may a jar of fire wine be in your dreams to greet you!"*

His Stupor spell descended in a mist over the battlefield—not quite the fog of war but certainly stupefying to the goblins. As they stepped onto the path between the vineyards, their consciousness grew dim, making them easy pickings for High Elf Archer.

The goblins fled in fear, looking right and left, but the other paths were likewise billowing with fog, and they had only two choices. One was to charge down the final available path; the other was to run with their tails between their legs. Most chose the former. After all, they hadn't been hurt themselves, and they knew they were not going to die yet.

"With a goblin level of brains, not much difference between my spell and a smoke screen."

"So you're saying your precious spell and Orcbolg's smoke toy are on the same level?"

"I'll take that as a compliment," Dwarf Shaman sniffed disinterestedly.

"Well, it was sarcasm," High Elf Archer sniffed back, releasing an arrow in the meantime.

"If what Beard-cutter says is true, that lot can see in the dark but not through smoke."

"I seem to recall saying he couldn't use fire..."

High Elf Archer herself could not see so well through the smoke. But any sufficiently advanced skill is indistinguishable from magic. If she could sense where

something was in any way, she could hit it, even with her eyes closed. She could almost feel the arrows lodge themselves in the distant goblins after their long yet brief flight through the dark. High Elf Archer allowed herself a smile as she pulled arrows from her quiver and shot them as fast as she could.

She had several bundles of the bud-tipped bolts lying at her feet. She didn't need to worry about running out of ammunition even at her pace; it was a situation she was very pleased with.

"Huh, for once I finally have enough arrows. I love being able to shoot with abandon!"

"Hey, Anvil," Dwarf Shaman said dubiously.

"What?" she growled.

"Where'd you get all these arrows anyway?"

"I didn't *get* them, exactly. I just asked the little ones around me for help."

She said, "Watch" and reached out through the crenellation, speaking ancient words that only the high elves knew—whereupon a branch of a tree growing near the window trembled as if with pleasure and stretched to meet her. In the blink of an eye, the extended branch had produced a hard, sharp bud: clearly an arrow.

"Thank you," High Elf Archer whispered, taking the bud-tipped branch and nocking it into her bow. "See?"

"Well, now....." Dwarf Shaman sighed, deep and earnest, and then said words that very rarely left his lips: "I guess you are useful sometimes!"

"Sometimes, my foot! I'm always helpful!" High Elf Archer's ears stood up proudly, then she readied three arrows at once in her bow and let them loose.

§

"How many have you killed?"

"Three, as of that one just now."

Along the final footpath, Goblin Slayer and his companions lay in wait for the goblins. Lamps were lined up at their feet, Priestess crouching beside them. There was a scratching sound as she struck flint against metal to get a spark and then a soft *fwoosh* as the lamp caught.

"There, it's ready."

"Good."

Priestess looked up, holding her sounding staff firmly in both hands. Anxiety was evident on her face, but despite the tightness at her mouth, she was smiling, a look of bravery. How had it been when they'd first met in the spring two years before? Goblin Slayer considered, then shook his head. Her actions had saved his life. Ever since, he had regarded this slight young girl as someone to be relied upon.

Perhaps Priestess noticed his gaze on her behind his visor. Her eyes shifted, unsure where to look.

"U-um...?"

"It's nothing," Goblin Slayer replied. "Follow the plan."

"R-right... I've g-got it!" She nodded fervently; he knew he did not need to give her more detailed instructions.

"Ha-ha-ha," Lizard Priest laughed, observing the exchange. "Has she finally broken through her shell?"

"Perhaps" was all he said. "But I'm counting on you when the fighting gets thick. I don't believe I can take care of them all by myself."

"Understood and very understood. The paragon of animals has only four limbs and so just two arms. If that does not suffice, simply borrow more," Lizard Priest said, then assumed a fighting posture. "As for my kind, we have claws and claws and fangs and tail at our disposal, so you may fight with no concern for what will happen."

Lizardmen's thinking might have remained obscure to him, but of their strength there was no question. Goblin Slayer nodded, then took up his own fighting stance.

At last there came a pounding of disorderly footsteps, no discipline or rhythm to them at all. Goblins might all be of similar build, but they still ran at slightly different speeds from one to the next. Obviously, it was not the brave who came in the forefront but only those who were quickest—and most thoughtless. The other goblins followed after, for they loathed the idea that the fastest might get all the spoils.

Thus, it was that a goblin at the very front saw some prey. A young woman, standing next to some ridiculously large object.

The goblin sniffed; he could smell the woman on the air, her youth. It mingled with an aroma of the forest.

“GOROOGOB!!”

The goblin was quite vocal as the nasty smile spread over his face; what do you suppose his words meant? *That’s mine*, perhaps. Or: *Hey, a woman!* Or: *Everyone, follow me!* Or perhaps it was simply a war cry.

Whatever, the result was the same. The goblin assumed things would go his way, that he would dive past the lizardman and get the girl—and with that in mind, he ran forward. Several others followed behind and several more behind them. They were not going to be late to the fun. They wouldn’t let that fool in front have her all to himself. *Mine, all mine!*

At that instant, Goblin Slayer barreled in from the side.

“GROG?!”

The goblins with the sharpest intuition turned immediately toward him. In the dark, they could see him coming. A cheap-looking metal helmet and grimy leather armor. A sword of a strange length, a round shield tied to his arm: a bizarre adventurer.

“GOROOGB—”

“One...!”

The goblin’s wide-open mouth was suddenly full of sword, slashing through his tongue, silencing him forever. The little

devil tumbled backward. Goblin Slayer slammed into the corpse, sending it flying and pulling his sword free in a single motion. Then he carried the momentum into another swing...

"Two!"

"GGBB?!"

He drove the weapon into the throat of one of them coming from the left. It pierced clear through to the spine, and the blade bent. He slammed the goblin with his shield as it hacked blood and froth, grabbing the hatchet that fell from its hand.

"Three!"

"GOOBOG?!"

He swung upward with it to cleave through the chin of the next goblin, splitting its face in half. Taking a step back, he deflected the spray of brains and blood with his shield.

I was right—these weapons are of excellent quality, Goblin Slayer reflected as he shook the blood from the hatchet. At least, they were high quality for goblin weapons. There was still no question that they belonged to the forces of Chaos.

Very convenient.

After all, they were the ones providing *his* supply of weapons. It just meant taking a little extra care. He found his footing with a shuffle step as he prepared to meet the next enemy.

"GOOROG!!"

"GOBOG! GOGOBRBG!!"

Of course, the goblins had hardly given *all* their attention to this pathetic adventurer. If anything, to them he was a mere obstacle, a mere obstacle to overcome on their way to the girl.

"O blood of my forefathers that courses through my veins! Behold your descendant's deeds in battle!!"

This meant they didn't immediately register the other impediment to their objective.

One was swept aside with a great slap of Lizard Priest's tail, then pounced upon where it fell and raked with his claws. The goblin was torn apart before he could even scream, his body reduced to a ragged heap. That was one, though he himself never knew it. Buried by the descendant of the fearsome nagas, terrible to goblins.

"Ahh, I have come near unto the ways of my fathers! All I need now is to breathe—oop!"

One of the cleverer little devils had taken advantage of the death of his foolish comrade, vaulting off the body toward Lizard Priest. The dagger in his hand dripped with something that gleamed slickly in the light, clearly some insidious poison.

"Hmph, a poisoned blade!"

"GOROGB?!"

But he was dealing with the great and powerful warrior-monk Lizard Priest, who aspired to sit among the nagas. His scales easily deflected the blade, his fangs sinking into the head of the goblin (flush with victory) before he knew what had happened.

There was a hideous crunch of flesh and bones.

Lizard Priest spat the creature out without swallowing a bite, giving the twitching corpse a kick for good measure. "Dangerous indeed, that one. Am I correct that you have not yet been gifted the Cure miracle?"

"Well, er..." Priestess smiled awkwardly at Lizard Priest, his tone completely conversational despite the spectacular battle raging around them. Truly it was said that even formerly grim memories meant nothing before the heroes of the scaled race. Priestess was all too used to being flustered with surprise by this point; even she was starting to think it was a little silly. "I hope and expect I'll receive it, eventually!"

"Mm, that is the spirit. It is through overcoming hardship and adversity that we proceed along the road and indeed change...!"

Still, was there any cleric so high in level that they should learn from *him*? Priestess brushed away the passing thought, steadied her breathing, and gradually elevated her awareness. One had to be calm of heart when praying—but one must also bind one's soul to heaven above in order for one's prayer to reach the gods. To achieve the necessary concentration, she clasped her sounding staff with both hands.

The goblins became far from her—and Lizard Priest and even Goblin Slayer. The world, herself, and the gods. The sound of rolling dice clattered in her ears. Breath: in, out.

And just as she began to lose herself in the great sea of all things...

"O Earth Mother, abounding in mercy, by the power of the land grant safety to we who are weak!"

Suddenly, the goblins found their way blocked, as if by a divine miracle.

"GOOROG?!"

"GGOBBOGBOB!!"

The goblins, especially those who found they could go no farther, were thoroughly confused. They charged forward, not wanting to be left behind, only to discover a wall of light in their path. They slammed their heads into the wall, bumping their noses and complaining loudly.

But it was those in front, oblivious to what had happened, who were in a truly fatal predicament.

"Four...!"

"GBROGB?!"

Goblin Slayer flung a hand ax, splitting open the skull of one goblin as he advanced forward. He raised his shield, trusting to the weight of himself and his equipment as he slammed into his next victim.

"GBBBG?!"

"That makes five!" He stole the dagger from the hand of the flailing goblin, driving it into the creature's throat to finish it off. He extricated the weapon, stood up, and then

threw it back behind himself in a single motion.

“GOOBGR?!”

“Six—how does it look?!”

In a pitched battle, he was never going to stop all of them. The ones that ran past Goblin Slayer, heading back to their comrades, were met by Lizard Priest.

“*Eeeeyaaaaahhhhhhhh!!*”

The spectacular primal bellow was the only answer to his question. Lizard Priest, practically become one of his terrible forebears, the nagas, was using all four of his limbs to the utmost. Any goblin that got within reach of him was eviscerated as if with a Blade Cusinart.

“I think... I think we’re okay!”

It was Priestess who supplied the more articulate response in between her desperate prayers. Clinging to her staff, reaching out as best she could to the gods in heaven, she was all too aware that she was the key to this operation.

Goblin Slayer, having confirmed that they were both still in one piece, nodded. “Do it!”

He took a sword from the corpse of a goblin sprouting a dagger from its throat, spinning it overhead. Somebody whistled between their fingers, and there followed a hail of stones from the mansion. They struck the goblins on the other side of the Protection barrier, the creatures screeching and crying.

Most likely, several would be killed. But not all of them. He didn’t care— This was about battlefield control. The servants were amateurs anyway. He wouldn’t want them to accidentally hit an ally in the confusion of battle. But still, humans were the best slingers in the world. With the Protection barrier to aim at, these were fearsome indeed.

I wonder if I was able to whistle well enough. Priestess was momentarily distracted by the thought but then hurriedly brushed it away.

When they had been conceiving this plan, High Elf Archer had wanted to take this part. It was about buying

time, causing confusion, and then during that confusion—

“Seven, eight—nine!”

“GGOOROOGB?!”

The first goblins to leap out in front met their ends at the hands of two adventurers.

More than ten, less than twenty. Such was the pile of corpses Goblin Slayer stood upon like a conquering ruler. He knew what he had to do. He used a goblin loincloth to wipe away the monstrous blood that stained his blade.

Keep his breathing level. Check for wounds. No problem. But even so, he had no time to rest.

“Wall!”

“Yes, sir!”

Priestess’s answer was instantaneous; she withdrew her consciousness from the Protection prayer, returning it to the present. The wall of light vanished like the frost of night in the morning sun.

“GOOGOB!!”

“GBBG! GOOROGB!!”

The goblins piled through, naturally focused only on what was right in front of their eyes.

They had been pelted with stones. The wall had disappeared. Their companions had been killed.

Now drive forward! Kill the scum! Rape the girl, again and again, and then kill her, too.

That was all that was in their heads. Even if they believed these were the most elevated thoughts possible.

Yes, it was those goblins who charged in at the front who had fallen into the deadliest situation.

After all, the single greatest strength of goblins was their numbers.

“O Earth Mother, abounding in mercy, by the power of the land grant safety to we who are weak!!”

And they lost that strength when a prayer repeated denied reinforcements.

“Hrrr—yahh!” Goblin Slayer cut his way straight into the

milling mass of goblins.

First, distracted by the scarecrow, they had been split up by the fog of Stupor. Then they charged through the vineyards down the last available path and found themselves cut off by Protection. Now all that remained was to dive in and destroy the next group, then tempt forward even more. Priestess could use three miracles in all. It was worth assuming this stratagem would only work twice.

Yes, it might have been possible to use Dwarf Shaman's Spirit Wall spell.

But the earth sprites are also what feed these fields.

It would be like using fire, and when he thought of it that way, he had to admit, if grudgingly, that it was best avoided.

But two times would be enough to eliminate the majority of the goblins.

The idea that a smaller number of goblins was less frightening was one even the newest adventurers could comprehend.

When faced with many problems, you have to split them up and deal with one at a time.

It was a bit of wisdom Dwarf Shaman had shared with him—something simple, a nice tip for daily life.

If he didn't try to take on an entire army but dealt with those goblins that came dashing straight through the "cave"? Well, there was no way *Goblin Slayer* could lose.

All things being equal.

Yes, assuming nothing else happened.

A whistle from the direction of the house broke into Goblin Slayer's thoughts. It could mean only one thing.

The river.

§

"It's—it's awful!" the old soldier exclaimed, blowing the whistle again as he raced into the room.

High Elf Archer was up before he finished speaking, her ears twitching. "The river, right?!"

"Yes'm, from the south—upstream—boats, coming this way! Couldn't... Couldn't see how many!"

No sooner were the words out of his mouth than High Elf Archer, bow in hand, was rushing from the room. When a high elf decides to use all her speed, she can move so fast it can be nearly impossible for a human to see her. The change from repose to action was startling. High elves need only a single step to be moving as fast as they can go. Therefore, by the time Dwarf Shaman wandered over, High Elf Archer was already looking out the back window.

"Whatcha see?"

"Goblins. At least, that's what the rowers look like."

"A goblin fleet? Good gods, was your forest asleep?"

"It wouldn't matter, since the river is under *human* jurisdiction!"

The jabs were flying, as usual, and though there was urgency, there was no anxiety. They weren't particularly shocked. After all, they had seen goblins on ships during their battle in the water town. It was impossible to say when exactly the goblins had stolen the secret of using vehicles and mounts, but they had. Wargs, wolves, and spiders were just the beginning—not the most pliant mounts, perhaps, but still something to ride. The problem was not so much that goblins had arrived on vehicles but, as ever, the sheer number of them.

High Elf Archer focused her hawklike eyes into the distance, watching the black shapes float through the night. Two of them—no, three.

"Damn, why are there always so many of them...?!" Even as she spoke, High Elf Archer put three arrows in her bow simultaneously and let them loose with a twang and a whistle. Each followed a different arc, as if the missile had a will of its own. Dwarf Shaman couldn't tell where they went. Being able to see in the dark and being able to see far away

were two completely different things.

"Did you get them?"

"Do you even have to ask?" High Elf Archer sniffed. She resumed her barrage of arrows. Each bolt became a glint in the starlight, like a comet, diving into the night. No doubt there were as many goblin corpses as there were arrows, or perhaps even more if some ricocheted. "But I'm afraid this isn't going to get us anywhere," High Elf Archer said quietly, taking another arrow from her quiver and pulling the string back with a creak. "I can take out all the oarsmen, but the river will still wash them this way. And if they pull back inside, I won't be able to touch them."

"You can't sink the ship with one shot?"

"No—sorry, my arm isn't as strong as my brother's!"

"So he *could*?" Dwarf Shaman murmured, but his words were lost in the sound of the bowstring singing like a harp. This time, even Dwarf Shaman could tell what happened, for he heard the sound of ripples as something hit the surface of the water.

I hate to say it, but this anvil can sure handle a bow, if nothing else.

Whether or not she did do it with the customary pride of her people, even a dwarf had no choice but to give credit where it was due.

Well, he couldn't slack off, then. How could he hold his head up as a dwarf if he let the elf do all the work?

"Perhaps I could use a spell to change the direction of the river's flow."

"Might work. I'd like to just get in among them if we could, but right now a hand-to-hand battle is a little... worrying!" On the last word, she let an arrow fly, and another goblin died. "After all, they've got numbers. I hate how—"

Unexpectedly, High Elf Archer fell silent.

"What's wrong?" Dwarf Shaman said, but when he saw the grim look on her face, he too stopped speaking.

High Elf Archer's long ears moved up and down, ever so slightly, and then she said sharply, "Something's coming... Something big. And fast. What the hell *is* that?"

"You telling me it's something you've never heard before?"

"I've heard something like it," High Elf Archer replied, knitting her brow. "But this...!"

At that moment, it became possible for everyone in the house to hear the terrible sound of cracking earth. It was a sound like thunder that came with the speed of lightning—not from the sky but rather from the very ground.

Yes, goblins' strength lay in their numbers but also in their cruel cunning.

There were boats on the river. Surely, then, there was something on the land as well.

"Dear gods..." Of the three of them there, only the old soldier knew that sound, and his face was drawn in fear as he groaned out the words.

He had heard that sound before on the battlefield. When you heard it from behind you, it gave you strength and boosted your morale, but from ahead of you, it inspired only a helpless knocking of the knees.

He had hoped he might never hear that sound again in his lifetime.

"It's a chariot...!"

§

It appeared to be some kind of bizarre war machine.

"Ee-eeek?!"

It was just about the time that the second Protection barrier disappeared, a third group of goblins being suckered in. The sound, like thunder, was accompanied by a great shadow kicking up earth, and this was what caused Priestess to scream.

“Hrk...!”

“This is not ideal...!”

The two more-experienced adventurers protected themselves from the flying stones, one with his shield and the other with his scales, lowering themselves into fighting postures.

“GBBORB?!”

“GORG?!”

There were cries from a couple of goblins in front of them as they were caught up and crushed beneath the wheels. Blackish gore splattered everywhere, adding fresh variety to the carnage inflicted at the hands of the adventurers. The stench of viscera was the unmistakable smell of death, the intestines still steaming with warmth.

Yes, these were weapons made for murder, crude but brutal.

“GOORGB! GG000ROGOB!!”

A goblin could be seen grinning above the lip of the vehicle, which glinted red in the light of the moon. The “chariot” he commanded had once, it could be seen, been a regular cart or wagon; they had simply turned it around. Then they had equipped the front with defensive shielding and a variety of terrible weapons: spikes, halberds, a catapult. The war cart advanced by means of handles pushed by countless other goblins.

“GOOROGOOROG!!”

A name for this implement? Perhaps *goblin battle wagon* would do. A terrible instrument no doubt made with the technical assistance of the forces of Chaos.

“Break!”

Which came first: Goblin Slayer’s order or the arrival of the chariot?

“GOOROGB?!”

“GRGB?!”

On came the battle wagon through the soft earth of the vineyard, catching several more goblins under its wheels.

Still, to be run over or otherwise impaled on the chariot's spikes, was perhaps the better fate. Those unlucky enough to be thrown into the air had several agonizing seconds to contemplate the fear of impending death.

"GGBBRG?! GOOROGGB?!"

For a few heartbeats, one monster flailed in the sky, as if trying to swim through the air—a vain pursuit. He hit the ground, where his head cracked with a sound like a ripe fruit bursting. His life, the last seconds of which he spent twitching, his limbs bent at impossible angles, was finally ended when he was run over by the careering chariot.

"GGOROGB! GGRRROGOBBGORGB!!"

The morale of the goblin battle wagon was unaffected by the casualty—at the very least, that of the chieftain who rode atop it. He continued to gibber orders, at which several of the goblins pushing him grumbled angrily. In any event, the war cart made a long arc, changing direction to pursue the adventurers once again. The bits of flesh and droplets of blood that had landed on the cart seemed to say: *You're next.*

"Well, good heavens!" Lizard Priest rolled away from the oncoming threat, slapping his tail jovially against the ground. "Chaos has outfitted itself well today, I see!"

Just beneath him, shielded by his massive frame, Priestess had curled up as small as she could in a desperate attempt to keep herself safe. "S-sorry..." she offered feebly, keenly aware of how slow her own reactions were. She might have grown and gained experience, even considerable amounts of it, but her physical capacity wasn't going to change dramatically. Nonetheless, even as the mud besmirched her delicate face and golden hair, she was keeping a close eye on the progress of the goblin battle wagon. "What are we going to do about this...?"

"They're still goblins," Goblin Slayer spat as he rose from one knee. "We'll do what we always do!"

But things weren't that simple—or more precisely, they

were getting less simple every moment. The whistle from behind them signaled that something was happening by the river.

"Tsk...!"

Whatever he did, no matter how crazy, no matter how outrageous, it wouldn't change the situation. But complaining about it wouldn't help, Goblin Slayer admonished himself, thinking as quickly as possible.

What should I do?

"How does it look to you?"

"Well, now..." The goblin battle wagon was tearing up the dirt as it wheeled around again. Lizard Priest stood easily to his feet. "Conventional wisdom says that to strike the general you must first deprive him of his horse—and it seems someone has rather tipped them off to it."

Yes, that was the first problem. Normally the goblins pushing the chariot around might have been undefended. But a shield ran out from the chariot to cover their heads and backs. It probably prevented them from seeing what was in front of them, but with the driver (if that was the word) present, it wouldn't matter. Even High Elf Archer's darting arrows would be hard-pressed to strike these monsters from the back or sides.

"What about from head-on?"

With an infinite amount of time, there were any number of plans they might be able to pull off. But the whistle probably meant reinforcements from the river. They would have time to make one move, two at best.

"I'm unsure," Lizard Priest responded, shaking his head. "With the miracle of Partial Dragon, five minutes perhaps. Depending on the balance between our strength and theirs and how quickly they move."

"A gamble, then," Goblin Slayer growled. "I don't like it."

"What's not to like? Every facet of this world can be described by numbers, they say."

Where had he heard that idea before? Goblin Slayer let

out a breath. "From the side... Spikes, I see."

"Ha-ha-ha, it seems they have anticipated most every mode of attack."

The axles of the cart had long spikes sticking out of the sides to sweep away columns of soldiers.

There were many problems here. The real problem—yes, it was that the problems were at once discrete and overlapping. In which case...

"Goblin Slayer, sir!"

Unexpectedly, he heard Priestess's strained but determined voice. She was getting to her feet, her vestments still covered in mud, her staff in her hands, and she was looking straight ahead.

The goblin battle wagon had come around again. Soon the order would be given, and it would charge toward them once more. Priestess, though, in spite of the evident anxiety and terror on her face, spoke clearly: "Let's narrow our problems down!"

"So that's your plan." Goblin Slayer nodded.

There was always a plan. No matter when. No matter where.

§

The rider of the goblin battle wagon cursed his subordinates for how slow and clumsy they were about changing direction. *Inept fools! Just think what will happen to you if our prey gets away.*

There was no need to share anything with the likes of these. The captain did all the work, so it was natural he should keep everything for himself. The rider conveniently forgot that just a few days before, he himself had viewed all authority figures as worthless freeloaders.

Now, where was the prey? Ah, there. After running around in confusion, they had done the stupidest possible

thing and trapped themselves in front of the fortress gates. The rider licked his lips when he saw the petite human girl standing there, clearly terrified, clutching her staff.

Let's give her something to really be afraid of.

The rider gleefully lifted a rusty hatchet, and in a single stroke, he cut through the rope of the catapult. There was a *thock* as the weight sank, the arm flying up in response. It was shaped like a huge spoon, in which sat a rock that now went flying through the air.

Goblins, of course, were in no way capable of calculating trajectories. The rock flew well over the girl's head, slamming into the wall of the fortress with a boom. Some of the bricks cracked under the impact, bits of them shattering away.

"GOOROGOOROOGG!!" The goblin charioteer was most pleased to see the girl cry "Eek!" and huddle down. It had been worth installing the catapult, even if it could only be used once.

The front wheels, which had lifted off the ground when the catapult launched its heavy missile, now came slamming back onto the earth. All that remained was to charge the girl and run her down or run her over. Just imagining how she would look at her last moments, how she would weep and beg for forgiveness, was enough to fire up the goblin. Carried along by the image in his mind, he stamped his feet and howled at his crew:

"GGORG! GG000ROOGGB!!"

"GOOROGB!!"

The idiots dallied and complained but finally began to push. If they got up enough of a head of steam, they could crush both the man and the woman to pieces, and they would be the victors. With this awesome and terrible weapon, they could not possibly be defeated.

That was how goblins were. Like slaving dogs reacting reflexively, they dove at whatever was right in front of them. They didn't consider that many of their comrades had

already died, that they themselves might soon be killed. No, each assumed he was the exception. He was smart. He wasn't like the others. He was better.

And so...

"O Earth Mother, abounding in mercy, grant your sacred light to we who are lost in darkness!"

From the moment the light flashed into their eyes, until their very last vile breaths, they never imagined the true identity of the dark shadow that leaped at them.

§

"Yah—!"

The instant Priestess's miracle caused a burst of sacred light, Goblin Slayer kicked off the ground and began to run. From inside the gate, he kicked the door open and came flying out. At almost the same moment, a great green form grabbed the frail young woman, pulling her backward.

"O proud and strange brontosaurus, grant me the strength of ten thousand!"

With the strength granted by the blessing of Partial Dragon, his burst of power was immense. Whether he could actively stop the chariot would have been a question of luck, but his speed was more than enough to keep him and the girl both out of its way.

Goblin Slayer, on the other hand, made a beeline for the goblin battle wagon. One step, two steps, three. He didn't put a foot wrong even as the battle wagon ate up the distance between them.

"Hrm...!"

The chariot reached the doorway at approximately the same instant as his momentum allowed him to roll onto the cart. He grabbed the frame of the catapult to ensure he wouldn't be shaken loose, pulling himself up. The contest would last until they were through the front living room.

The furnishings rushed by.

“Orcbolg?!”

“GOOROGBB?!”

High Elf Archer could be heard from the stairway. But he had no time to respond. With her eyes, she could see what was happening anyway. He searched for the dagger at his belt and attacked the goblin as it shook its head, trying to clear the last of the blindness.

“GOROG!”

“With *you*—” He was going in for close combat, and that meant a reverse grip was best. It provided the shortest route between his blade and the goblin’s throat. “—that’s twenty-five!!”

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There was a scuffle—he might be dealing with a goblin, but he was doing it atop a shaking cart—but he twisted the hilt, gaining a critical hit. The goblin drowned in his own blood, unable even to scream, reduced to a bit of repetitive twitching. There were a few scant breaths of life left in the body; Goblin Slayer leaned into it to snuff them out.

“GGOORGB?!”

“GGBG! GGOOROGB!!”

Beneath the shield, unaware of the death of their leader, the goblins gibbered and jabbered. But what did he care?

“Hrrgh...” Goblin Slayer gave the shield a kick to shut them up, then took tight hold of the side of the cart. Only he, riding atop the chariot and thus with an unobstructed view, fully understood what was about to happen.

The war cart found ample purchase on the foyer’s marble, charging ahead—until it didn’t.

It was a wall.

Goblin Slayer felt a shock run through his body comparable only to a blow from the hammer swing of some massive creature. He found himself bent almost in half, then straightened back out again with a shock. His arms, clinging to the chariot, groaned; and he could feel something hard hit the goblin corpse he bore on his back.

“GGORBBG?!”

“GGBG! GOORGBB?!”

The goblins, having finally realized something was amiss beyond their blinders, started to shout, but it was too late. The next thing they felt after the impact was the sense that they were floating, at least for an instant. There was a cool kiss of night breeze.

The impact had torn the catapult clean off the war cart, the rest of which had punched through the wall and was tumbling through space. The few seconds before it hit the ground (it wouldn’t be a very clean landing) seemed inordinately long.

“Hrg...ggh...!”

Goblin Slayer's body shook again with the terrific impact. He had never been on a bucking horse before, but he imagined this was what it was like. If he fell, the best he could hope for was to hit the ground hard; but at worst, he might be thrown into the spikes projecting from the wheels.

Goblin Slayer simply focused on clinging to the battle wagon, keeping his breath steady.

"GBBOGB?! GOGGG?!"

"GOOROGGB!!"

The goblins pushing the cart along were in roughly the same position: unable to let go, carried along by the cart's momentum.

Their ends would come soon, at any rate.

The cart arrived full tilt at the bottom of the hill, speeding toward the dark river. And the goblin ship attempting to make its way down it.

"GORGB?!"

"GOOOROGGBB?!"

On deck, the goblins, who had been focused on defending against the hail of arrows from the mansion, cried out as they spotted the battle wagon. No doubt they were exclaiming, *What the hell?!* or *What are those idiots doing?!*—something of that nature.

An instant later, the chariot broadsided the ship, its weight and speed turning it into a giant battering ram. Goblin Slayer himself hardly knew how he managed to withstand the impact. The chariot plowed into the ship's hull, tearing clear through to the center.

There could hardly be said to *be* a chariot anymore—or a ship. Just struts of timber waiting to be reduced to so much flotsam. As they went plopping into the water, they had only the vague impression that they were slamming into something white. Then their brains registered that they had been plunged into something heavy and viscous, and they began to reflexively struggle. But they could not escape. The water sprites pulled mercilessly on their legs, and as

for their heads—yes, the remains of the chariot itself served as a lid over them.

“GOBOO?!?!”

“GOOGRBB?!”

The goblins pounded desperately on the cart, coughing and hacking froth and foam, but it didn’t budge. They would soon suffocate and drown. Goblin Slayer watched to be sure, then kicked off the river bottom. That’s right: Sink down deep, then kick off—and even if both your hands were bound, you could swim.

It was even easier if, on the ring finger of your left hand, you wore a Breath ring.

The spark had long vanished from it, but the magic contained within was unchanged. Even in the depths, he had no reason to fear. He pushed through the surface of the water, into the open air, droplets dribbling from his helmet.

“Ahh...”

He opened his mouth wide, sucking in air. It carried the thick humidity of early summer, an atmosphere that conducted magical energy poorly.

“GOOROGB!!”

“GOGB?! GOORGB?!”

He looked around and discovered that the goblin battle wagon had driven into what appeared to be the second of three ships. The vessel had split in two with a great crack, both halves now proceeding down to the bottom. On deck, screeching at the top of their lungs, were a few goblins who had jumped clear of the impact. But there was no help for them now.

The goblins had thought that if they rode on a chariot, or sailed in battleships, that victory would be theirs. Could they be defeated or sunk? Not *I*, each one was sure. Now they were fighting to get off the deck, each trying to save himself first. Even if they succeeded in jumping into the river, they would most likely be slammed by the sinking derelict, pinned down and crushed to death.

But even so... In Goblin Slayer's mind, that changed nothing. He was just considering whether to dive down, using his ring to get deep enough to avoid the hulk, or whether to climb up its side when—

"Orcbolg, look sharp!" a clear voice called out, and soon he was saved. A bud-tipped arrow came whistling by, lodging itself in the wood boards just in front of him. He noticed the rope attached to it and grabbed on without hesitation.

"My word, you do come up with the wildest plans, Beard-cutter...!"

The other end of the rope was in the hands of Dwarf Shaman, standing with his feet planted firmly on the bank. High Elf Archer had her hands wrapped around his waist, pulling with all her strength to keep the dwarf from sliding into the river. Priestess, covered in mud, came rushing up to the two friends engaged in their tug-of-war. Following her came Lizard Priest, looking supremely satisfied as he let out a great breath.

"The impact with the ship was not part of the plan." Did Goblin Slayer's voice quite reach the others?

"A'right, now, Beard-cutter, hold on good and tight!"

"Yes." He nodded. "Sorry for the trouble, but I need your help."

"Ahh, no dwarf would stand by and watch his friend drown. He'd pull him out or go to the bottom with him!"

"It's looking a lot more like the bottom at this rate!" High Elf Archer cried.

"I'll help," Priestess said, reaching out with an awkward smile. And when Lizard Priest shouted, "Allow me!" and added his strength to the pullers, it seemed there was nothing more to worry about.

"Nothing to worry about?" Goblin Slayer mumbled underneath his helmet, amazed at himself for even having the thought. He glanced back to see the goblin ship cracking apart and going under, plainly visible even in the

darkness of night.

This, he suspected, represented the successful completion of the quest. The goblins would all die. If there were any survivors, they would be mopped up as they came on shore. It was over. Or, at least, it ought to have been.

For heaven's sake: He never could feel completely confident. He probably never had, not since ten years ago—ever since that goblin hunt protecting that village in his first year. Had he, in fact, truly protected this mansion? Had he been able to clear away the suspicions surrounding Sister Grape? How long would the battle with the goblins go on?

What had he been able to accomplish? Did he even think he could accomplish anything?

He thought back over the role he had played in these events.

Then he asked himself if he had fulfilled that role.

He almost didn't know.

All he knew was that at the other end of the rope he clung to were his comrades.

"Hrmph." Goblin Slayer sighed for the umpteenth time, adjusting his grip on the rope. "Goblin hunting is indeed simpler."



“There’s so much to—*do* !” the warlock cried, panting as she rushed through the forest holding up the hem of her outfit. Anyone who thought a spell caster was of no use was not, in her opinion, even a real adventurer. They didn’t know of that warlock’s great deeds surrounding the diadem, nor the searches of the Gray One, nor any spell caster like Greyhawk.

I think they had more skill with the sword, though...!

“Um, hey, you kids, get back! You’re too far forward! You want to die?!”

“Oh! Uh, s-sorry...!”

Maybe the rookies had wanted to see how their allies were doing; in any event, they got too close to the front lines and certainly earned themselves a scolding.

A spell caster’s job was to keep an eye on the overall battlefield situation, yes, but there were limits. Newbies had flocked to an assignment protecting the Temple of the Earth Mother, but most of them weren’t worth their weight in coppers. Even the sight of the kids backing quickly away raised the warlock’s hackles. After all, she was busy maintaining the force field that was keeping the manticore at bay. Annoyance would only get in the way of her concentration, she knew, but she couldn’t shove the feelings away; she would just have to live with them.

“Excuse me, but I thought you were supposed to be looking after the striplings...!” she complained to her companion, a monk, even as she grimaced at the manticore scratching at the wall with its claws.

“Gracious,” the monk responded, looking a bit put-upon,

as always, as he ran a hand over his shaven pate. "I'm trying to keep a miracle ready to go here in case anyone needs to be cured of poison, and meanwhile, I'm giving first aid wherever I'm able—can't blame me if one or two kids slip past me." A panoply of bandaged, groaning adventurers littered the ground around the monk. He was caring for novices who had been wounded on the front lines. It was a decent excuse.

But only just. Adventurers who showed up to a battle without so much as a potion of their own deserved to die, the warlock thought—but she kept that to herself. She knew there were some lines that shouldn't be crossed. Besides, spell books were expensive. When she thought of her own early days, she knew she was in no position to judge.

This is all because they leak this stuff to the black markets in other nations even though they're supposed to be military secrets! Filled with completely justified rage, the warlock bit her thumb in the direction of her distant homeland.

"That's not very ladylike."

"Shut your face!" the warlock cried, almost hysterically. "Aren't you finished over there yet?!"

"Shut *your* face! I'm workin' as fast as I can!" an ax man shouted back, burying his weapon in the undead chimera closing in on him.

The monster was enough to make you doubt the sanity of the people calling the shots for Chaos. It was a beast made of several dead people bound together, a multitude of arms and legs. It writhed forward, emitting some noxious miasma, waving its arms wildly as it attacked.

The ax wielder somehow managed to dodge the bits of flying flesh as he joined up with the other adventurers to continue the fight.

"Wah! This thing won't quit! It's freaking me out!" This came from a young man of the warrior class who wielded both a club and a sword, although his jabbering didn't stop

him from doing his work. It was an unusual fighting style, but his persistence was admirable. He was matched by the young woman behind him, who despite her obvious anxiousness held her sword-and-scales high and picked her targets.

"How long do I have to keep this force field active for you lot to do your jobs?!"

"No idea!"

The warlock bit back a shout of *Morons!* at the thoughtless answer and focused on her spell. One important fact: The bizarre undead monster appeared to be poisonous. And then they'd thrown a mantichore into the mix. Poisonous as well, naturally.

Actually, it was supposed to be the oh-so-knowledgeable wizard who would notice these creatures were venomous and alert the others.

But I've heard tales of wizards who wouldn't have known a tiger even if one had them by the neck...

She was annoyed, for one thing, because they'd had to start with the subject of what a mantichore was. It had an old man's head, a lion's body, a scorpion's tail, and plenty of brains—wasn't that pretty common knowledge? And then, on discovering that it was poisonous, the reaction had been that it was inconceivable to take on two poisonous enemies at once and that she should deal with one of them.

"Wizards are weak," my ass! Worthless, no-good—!

But the only response to her frustrated grumbling was a roar from the mantichore whose meaning she could not divine.

"Ahem-hem?" Even the interjection from the harefolk girl, her cheeks stuffed with provisions, rubbed the warlock the wrong way. The young lady—it was hard to tell if she was white or brown—flicked her ears as if something itched. "That guy's just been hanging out back there this whole time—s'pose something's happened to him?"

"Whazzat?" the ax wielder said, punctuating his remark

with a blow that took off several (it wasn't quite clear how many) of the undead monster's arms. Then he put his ax on his shoulder and said, "You're up!"

"Say *what*?!" the young man responded, but footsteps could already be heard retreating.

The ax wielder marched over to the adventurer who was skulking in the shadows. "Listen, you! What in the gods' names do you think you're doing?! We said we need every single person to help hold these things off!"

"Hrm..." The man looked vaguely displeased to have been spoken to, but then he smiled with an "Aw, don't mind me. Stomach's just been bothering me a little bit..."

"Your stomach?!"

"That won't do," said the monk, coming up with timing so perfect it was almost as if he had been waiting to make his entrance. "Perhaps that undead thing has been spraying poison around. It would be most dire if any of it got on you. For one thing, it wouldn't be cheap to heal..."

The young boy and girl had somehow been holding the line behind them when they both cried out.

"This ain't going well!" Harefolk Hunter exclaimed, rushing over to back them up.

A quest from a temple was supposed to be pretty plum work, but if you got sick and had to pay for healing, it would defeat the point. Quite ignoring such calculations, though, the monk was happily digging through his pouch. "No worries, I'll have a look. I can give you a good rate. Now, the best medicine when an elf has an upset stomach is..."

"Elf?" the ax wielder inquired. Long ears could indeed be seen flicking in front of him. But the rank tag bore the inscription *human*. "How blind do I have to be not to realize this thing's a fake?!"

Whether he had found it or made it, he had picked a low rank in any event. The imposter clucked his tongue and jumped well back as the ax wielder dove at him. "Hrmph! If the farm had been done in, I wouldn't have to go to all this

trouble...!" He wiped his face and drew a dagger, but the warlock was too busy to see what else happened. What mattered for her was to keep an eye on the battlefield, maintain the force field, and see where spells might be most useful. The undead creature was one thing, but the manticore could use magic, so protection against the same would be necessary. She began to intone a spell, wracking her memory to figure out how many this was today, how many she had left, and to recall exactly what the words were so she didn't accidentally recite a spell that didn't exist.

And on top of all that, she had to keep a watch on all the people on the back row who had just become adventurers this year—it was a great deal of trouble, but there was no choice. And there were all these wounded—what was that monk up to? *Am I supposed to tend to the casualties, too?*

And the ax wielder, what was he doing? Good gods, had he abandoned the kids on the front row?

Slash slash splatter splatter. Ring ring. Scream scream. Cry cry. Grrahhh!

"Oh, for the gods' sake! It's *too damn loud!!*"

The next second, there was a great *ZAP!* and the head of the man, swallowed up by the bolt of lightning, burst like a ripe fruit.

"Tonitrus oriens iacta! Rise and fall, thunder!"

A bolt had shot from the cruelly twisted fingertips, piercing him through the head.

Everyone fell silent at the explosion of light, even the monsters. The warlock grimaced at the adventurers all around, her shoulders heaving as she sucked in breath. She hardly noticed as they all took a reflexive step backward. "So I didn't really get what was going on, but I went ahead and iced him anyway. Any objections?!"

Everyone shook their heads emphatically.

"Then get back to your places! Now!" the warlock shouted.

I've got so much to do—give me a break already!

No one dared to talk back as the warlock returned to tending the force field.

None of them knew, or could have known, that the dark elf had been a runner tasked with doing evil to the Earth Mother.

§

“Looks like things have gotten started over by the Earth Mother’s temple, too!”

“Yeah?” Heavy Warrior responded to Druid Girl’s familiar, making sure he had heard right even as he gave a swing of his greatsword.

Er, guess she’d get mad if I called it a familiar.

She always said something about how she was just asking for the help of forest creatures, not actually making them her servants. He considered the issue as he sliced through the demons’ foot soldiers with his sword. He could cut two or three of them clean in half with a single stroke, dispersing the blood and flesh from this world into the spirit realm.

They might be so-called lesser demons, but they were still terrible monsters worthy of fear. And they had surrounded the adventurers who had delved into the underground mausoleum, ten or twenty deep. To top it all off, greater demons, presumably their leaders, could be seen here and there. The only saving grace was that there were no archdemons anywhere around...

“DDAAAAEEEMOOONNNNNN!!”

“Hrrrah!!”

A goat-headed demon bellowed at Heavy Warrior, and he bellowed right back, shimmying forward and finding his distance.

Damn, ugly servants of Chaos...

“You really wanna drink the Holy Earth Mother’s wine that bad?!”

It was Spearman who pushed forward, dodging the butcher’s knife as the goat-headed demon brought it down and replying with his spear. The magical weapon he wielded deflected the enemy blade by the slimmest of margins, its sharpness not the least bit diminished by the time it pierced the demon’s throat.

“DDDEEEEEEEAAAMMMMOOON!!!”

But one of the demonic things about demons is their vitality. The flesh around the spear tip began to bubble and swell, closing the wound with the weapon still inside. The demon grabbed the shaft of the spear with its powerful arms, pulling, trying to extract the spear tip, while Spearman held fast and tried to keep control of his own weapon. The smile on his face betrayed no hint of any thought that his victory might be in doubt.

“That is...an offering...for abundance...” A super-dimensional storm sliced through space. Holding her staff high and weaving a spell was his doughty partner, Witch. “If it is...besmirched...then there will be...no fruits...for, a year...” Magical power welled up in the underground mausoleum, storm clouds forming at the ceiling. “*Caelum... ego...offero!* I offer up the heavens!”

In that instant, a massive blizzard began, complete with hail and fog. In a twinkling, the demons were covered in frost, whited out, frozen, slammed down by chunks of ice.

“*Geez, what a scary lady,*” Spearman mumbled to himself, and Heavy Warrior quite agreed. But even now...

Things are taking one step forward, one step back here.

They had successfully broken into the hideout of the evil cultists seeking to defile the offertory wine of the Earth Mother, but this was what they had found: an endless parade of demons. Not to mention they were headed off at every path, with no sense that they would reach the innermost chamber anytime soon.

Although her ladyship the archbishop said it didn't matter to her.

"Hey, how's it going over there?"

"It's a tough one," Half-Elf Light Warrior replied lazily. He and Scout Boy were busy trying to distract the other demons.

Yes, that was right: He wasn't alone in here. He couldn't relax, couldn't risk taking the enemy lightly, but there was nothing to fret about. Look right over there: A party famous for demon slaying was doing what it did best. A chubby magic user was firing off Magic Missiles, a female fighter and paladin were making the most of their swords, and even the healer was unleashing cylindrical rockets.

"DDAAEEEMMONN...!"

Unfortunately, none of the hits were critical.

The greater demon attacking the adventurers was truly bizarre. (Well, all demons are bizarre.) It appeared as a rather attractive female warrior, blue-skinned and holding a lance. Its finely shaped body was covered with just enough armor to preserve its modesty, but showed more than enough skin to be provocative.

But that was only half of what might be said about this woman.

"DDDDDEEEEMMMOONNDD...!"

Because beneath the alluring, giggling upper half of the female demon was the body of a gigantic spider. The lower half of her body writhed with legs twisted and covered in wiry hair, bristling with poisonous barbs. In all, it would take two human hands to count them—six legs she had—and two arms—eight limbs altogether.

Truly, she was a sight to make one doubt one's sanity. And it seemed she was the leader here in this place of the dead.

"All right, this one's mine!" Female Knight crowed as she dove forward. She was wearing her full armor, helmet and everything.

The insect demon chuckled when she saw her, then leaned forward on all her legs, preparing to charge.

"Don't let down your guard, hey?"

"Come on, I know what I'm doing. It's time for me to build my legend and finally get that paladinhood..."

It seemed the presence of a paladin in the demon-slaying party had pricked her pride something fierce. Female Knight ignored the exasperation on Heavy Warrior's face as she cast her shield aside and gripped her sword firmly in both hands.

"Come at me!" she shouted, and the monster came rushing toward her, its six legs scrabbling.

A knight who was at one with her mount couldn't have matched the spider demon for speed and skill. But of course: She *was* her mount, and her lance was driving toward Female Knight at an incredible rate.

The sheer force of the impact, backed up by the massive weight of the demon, could have brought down even the gigantic beasts said to live in the south. If the average adventurer had taken such a hit, they would have been lucky if there was anything left of them to bury.

But when the two knights passed by each other, Female Knight ducked down, almost bending in half. In a single smooth motion, she brought her sword up to meet the spear tip. There was a *whoosh*, or at least so it seemed. Female Knight's metal boots produced smoke as they scraped along the ground. The demon, who had left gouges in the floor of the mausoleum from her charge, was missing the top half of her body. The female torso, still clutching the spear (cut in half by an upward diagonal slice), flew through the air, a triumphant smile still on its face.

Blood the color of muddy water rained down on them, and Female Knight's helmet came off with a clatter. Heavy Warrior realized she must have taken advantage of her opponent's momentum to make the slash as the creature went by.

I've known her all this time, and I've never seen her pull something like that...

He would ask her about it later, more than once, but she would only smirk and say that a knight's secrets are not divulged to anyone else. Heavy Warrior had no idea even what kind of technique it was or where she had learned it. Although once, thoroughly drunk, she would reveal that the move was very old, so old that it was hardly remembered anymore.

"You reap what you sow," she said now, calmly, a single droplet of blood drawing a line down her face, as Heavy Warrior personally brushed her hair aside. "But still, good lord... What kind of idiot gets baited into a headlong charge?"

"That's what you just did, you idiot."

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§

“You did quite a good job bearing with it...”

“Well, I knew I could charge in there anytime and be like, *Bam! I win!* Heck, winning’s my role!” Hero said to Sage as she raced through the deep dungeon below the frontier funeral mound like a bolt of light. In her hand was the sacred sword. On her body, the magical armor. And she was buffed out with a plethora of enchantments bestowed on her by her friends. The green hunting cloak and iron spear had their charms, but this was still her favorite outfit.

“But, like, where to go and how to get in or whatever? That stuff’s way over my head.”

I swear, it’s nothing but trouble.

Until not long ago, it had been a simple matter of finding the Demon Lord or unraveling the cultists’ plans, then bursting into their hideout and taking care of business. But now it was all politics and plots, complicated, fiddly situations. Sometimes she thought how nice it would be just to charge in without thinking about anything else. But her companions told her flatly that was *not acceptable*. To ignore the proper ways of the world was to find oneself excluded from that world, they said. If everyone loves you that much, if they trust you that much, then let them trust to you what they will. No need to solve every problem in the world all by yourself.

Because after all, the world doesn’t revolve around just one person. People you know, people you don’t know, good people, bad people: All are equally struggling to survive.

Take this funeral mound, for example: It had been reported by some adventurer who was just trying to complete a goblin hunt. And it was someone else from the Adventurers Guild who had brought word to the archbishop. And now it was this whole huge hunt, for which

merchants had provided a great deal of equipment.

The king himself had made sure there was money for all of this—money provided by taxpayers across the nation. And when it came to the battle, it was other adventurers who helped to draw off the rabble of enemies.

And now Hero was running as fast as she could down this path that someone, somewhere, sometime had made.

So as much as she felt it was all a lot of trouble...

It also makes me really, really happy.

“Hee-hee...!”

“And what are we laughing at?”

“Aw, nothin’!” Hero shook her head. Sword Saint went in the vanguard, making attacks of opportunity on the demons any time they got within reach.

Some evil cultists had had a plot to defile the holy wine of the Earth Mother. They created an army of undead, summoned devils, worked with shady merchants, and ultimately aimed at performing a foul ritual deep underground. And now Hero had her chance to bring it all tumbling down.

If she were to fail, then the land of the frontier town would suffer for at least a year, perhaps even longer. She could not afford to let this chance escape her, nor did she intend to. The hero couldn’t be defeated. That’s how it went.

“Next right. Then straight ahead, left at the third corner.”

“Got it!”

Sage, using a spell to help them move faster, was ever so slightly short of breath as she dictated the directions. It would have been simplest to use a Gate scroll to jump right to where they needed to go, but a spirit barrier was in the way and making life difficult. A careless cross-planar jaunt with one of those around could see them come back to their own world a hundred years in the future or something—and she didn’t want that.

Hero was supposed to save the world. She wasn't the hero because she *could* save the world; it was *trying* to save the world that made her a hero.

I guess if anyone was like, You sure you can save this world? *I'd be sort of like,* I dunno!

What she could do might not amount to much. But she had friends who mattered to her, and there were so many people in this world. So she *had* to save it, and she was confident it would work out somehow.

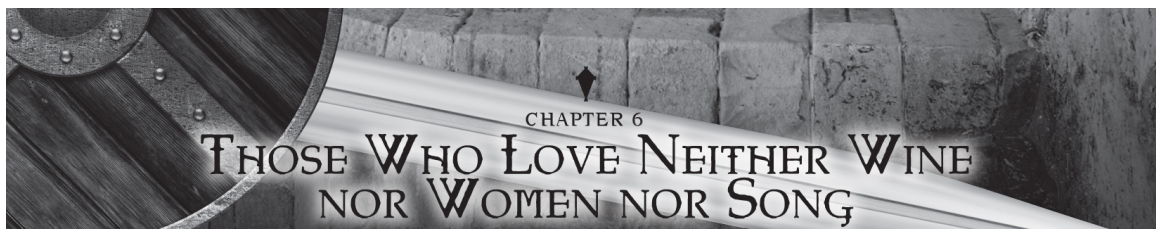
"There's a door at the end of the hallway! You want me to slice through it?"

"Let's do this the classic adventuring way—kick it down!"

"That's not classic."

Next, as always, came the big, climactic battle.

Hero gave a yell and launched herself into the middle of the big bads, lighting up those dark depths of the earth with an explosion of sun.



A festival is a day of celebration. Cheerful music fills the air, inviting everyone and their dog to trundle out to join the fun. It would be untrue to say that there is no one who dislikes these moments—but even so, a festival is a day of celebration.

On this particular festival day, the Temple of the Earth Mother was very much a part of the merrymaking in the frontier town.

“All right, everyone, come on! Step on those grapes!” the clerics exhorted, producing a rousing shout from the assembled onlookers.

The early-harvest grapes would be crushed underfoot this day, a festival given in the hopes of good wine come autumn. Holy day though it was, admittedly, some were there simply to see the young women in their bare feet. Others just wanted to drink some wine or to flit about the festival nibbling on this and that. Others still came merely to gawk—but a day of celebration is one on which all these things and more are forgiven. Neither the clerics serving the Earth Mother, nor anyone else, paid them any mind.

I'm sure that's for the best, Goblin Slayer thought absently from where he sat, just apart from the crowd. He was leaning against the trunk of a tree, using its shadow to get out of the bright sun. As he gazed at the crowd standing in the light, he considered the recent commotion. A great many adventurers had saved this place, so today a great many adventurers were invited. He had been among them—and he had considered refusing.

“If you would come, it would make me...very happy!”

But after this final push from Priestess, he could hardly refuse. Yet, despite his attendance at the festival, Goblin Slayer was unsure how to go about enjoying himself.

“What’s wrong? Done in by the drink already?”

He turned in the direction of the unexpected voice. There he found Sister Grape, who gave him a friendly wave and said, “H’lo.” She was not in her usual nun’s habit but in a special crimson dress just for crushing grapes.

Goblin Slayer thought about it for a moment, then shook his head as if to say *no*. “I don’t drink much.”

“Some people might say that a man who doesn’t know how to enjoy a drink doesn’t know how to live.” It was an insouciant comment, but Sister Grape softened it with a friendly smile. “At least now we know why you’re not having any fun.”

“No...” Goblin Slayer thought a moment longer, then turned his helmet in the direction of the merriment. Spearman, who was watching the clerics stomp the grapes, was whispering something to Witch. Female Knight, in civilian clothes, had a cup of wine in one hand and a flush on her face as she talked garrulously to Heavy Warrior. The younger boys seemed transfixed by the sight of the clerics, while the girls made exasperated faces and snide comments. Harefolk Hunter was thoroughly enjoying herself, on account of this was a festival, but she was shedding too profusely to be allowed to stomp the grapes.

Padfoot Waitress could be seen mooning over a food stall, dragging the workshop apprentice behind her as she rushed around the festivities. As for the owner of the farm, he was deep in conversation with the temple’s Mother Superior—perhaps he had provided some of the foodstuffs. Guild staff members, including Inspector, must have decided to take the day off, for they wandered through the crowd in personal clothes.

Lizard Priest and Dwarf Shaman were filling their mouths and bellies with food and drink and generally

having a grand old time.

"I'm not...having no fun at all."

"That so? *Well, good, then.*" With that, Sister Grape helped herself to a place by the tree he was leaning on, resting against it much like he was. She glanced over at him, just briefly, then scratched her cheek as if embarrassed. Finally, she managed: "Listen, uh, thanks. For everything."

"I didn't do anything in particular."

He could tell she looked over at him then, though she moved only her eyes. "That an attempt at modesty?" There was a slight edge to her tone. Goblin Slayer couldn't fathom what might lie behind it.

"No, it's a fact. I—" He went silent for a moment, looking for the correct words to say. "—only killed the goblins." Unable to come up with anything more articulate or more elaborate, what finally emerged from his mouth was this characteristic, dispassionate statement.

Sister Grape closed her mouth and looked at the ground. A breath of wind passed by, rustling the branches. The hiss of the leaves sounded very loud.

After a long moment, she finally said, "All the more reason I better thank you, then... I guess."

It seemed to him that perhaps Sister Grape was no better at finding the right words than he was.

"Is that so?"

"Sure is."

So the two of them nodded at each other, and the conversation about the unrest that had engulfed them both stopped there.

A few minutes later, Sister Grape said, "I better go talk to the others," and stood up away from the tree.

"All right," Goblin Slayer replied and nodded.

He watched her go and saw her head over at a trot to a young man of noble mien. The wine merchant's son. He looked spent but still had an eagerness about him as he

called out to Sister Grape. She hesitated, but there was no warning in his voice; he was even smiling.

That's good, Goblin Slayer thought. Whatever they might talk about now, whatever the relationship between them might be in the future, it was good.

From what he had heard, the wine merchant had begun to sell a vintage he dubbed, "Wine of the Summer of Goblin Slaying." It took a certain amount of nerve, that move, but then again, maybe that was what it took to be a businessman...

Goblin Slayer consider for a moment, then discarded that thought. Whatever and however, if people were trying to move forward, then that in itself should be applauded. All was do or do not. As his master had told him many times.

I suppose if he heard about what just happened, he would shout at me and give me a good punch...

"...Did I do it?"

"Do what?"

This time, he knew who had come over to him. It was the girl, his childhood friend, peeking around at him over his shoulder. She was wearing the same kind of red dress as Sister Grape had been and radiated cheerfulness. "Oh, you mean this?" She held up the hem as if for his inspection. The wind caught it and it billowed up, so that he could see the fine stitching. "Hee-hee! They even invited me, and I figured, why not? What do you think?"

"I don't really know."

This answer, which he had produced with a fair deal of concern and consideration, seemed to meet her expectations. "Oh yeah?" she responded and smiled, spinning around a few times for his benefit. "It's so rare I get to dress up at all. It's easy to get carried away!"

Maybe that also explained the uncommonly jovial mood of the clerics. When he thought about it, he realized Priestess was almost always in her vestments as well, and if one were to be shut up in a temple all the time...

"Say."

"What is it?"

She sat down beside him. She was so close that even through his armor, he could sense the warmth of her body.

"You remember how...marriage came up, that one time?"

"...Yes." Goblin Slayer nodded. Nodded and grunted softly. As usual, he wasn't sure quite what to say. "There are many obstacles."

Therefore, when he finally spoke, she said, "Yeah," and nodded like she did when they were children. "I get it..." Her voice was so small. For some reason, it evoked a memory of a time long ago when they had fought.

"...All I can do is to deal with what is directly in front of me, one thing at a time."

It had been five years, and then another two years, and something seemed somehow to have changed—this was the result. Had he been able to do anything? Perhaps even the thought was childish.

"Sure, but..." She was smiling, her voice cheerful. "If you keep taking care of one thing and then another, eventually you'll take care of everything, right?"

"You think so...?"

"Yeah, I do."

It seemed she truly believed it, from the bottom of her heart. There was no hesitation in her words; her voice was crystal clear. Goblin Slayer looked up at the sky through the branches of the tree. "...I see."

"Mm." She gave a quick nod, then jumped to her feet with a hearty "Hup!" She patted the grass off her skirt, then looked at Goblin Slayer. "Okay, then. I'm going to go stomp some grapes—you want to come watch?"

He thought for a moment, then nodded. "Yes."

"I'll be waiting for you!" she said, waving. She ran through the grass with light footsteps, toward the huge barrel full of grapes. Priestess, High Elf Archer, and Guild Girl were all waiting for her, dressed in unfamiliar clothes.

Happiness is budding grapevines,
a hillside alive with dancing blue butterflies,
and the autumn's harvest moon
a brooch upon the neck of the Earth Mother.

When the flowers bloom and bear fruit in all their
glory,
with my beloved on the second starry night,
with the birdsong of the forest for dawn bells,
I feel the gentle touch of the Earth Mother.

The sweet yet bitter nectar
lights a flame in my heart
spanning the stars with the twin moons;
the joyous song of the Earth Mother is calling.

The young women raised their voices, laughing, playing,
singing a song, as they trod the grapes, making the wine.

It would be good wine this year, surely. He was surprised
to find himself thinking so. Goblin Slayer took in the entire
scene, then slowly stood and started walking.

If today was indeed a day of celebration—then for now,
let the thought of celebration be enough.

AFTERWORD

Hullo, Kumo Kagyu here!

How'd you enjoy Volume 10 of *Goblin Slayer*? It was, I think you'll agree, a story in which goblins appeared, so Goblin Slayer had to slay them. I worked really hard to write enough to hit two-digit volume numbers, and I would be thrilled if you've enjoyed it.

It might not sound so difficult to hit two-digit levels, but in D&D, it's wicked hard. I'm on the cusp of going from heroic to legendary, here. (The mythical starts at level 21.) Tough stuff.

Now that I stop to look back on the last six months of frantic work (and with Volume 10 put to bed) I feel like I don't have any writing left in me. Okay, so that's pretty much what I say in the afterword every month. This probably makes it five times or so now, if you're keeping track.

What's that? You haven't read all the others? I see, so you're one of *those*...!

All right, digression over. (I promise.)

Once again, it took a ton of people to get this book safely out the door. All my creative types and gaming friends. All the administrators at the aggregator blogs.

The illustrators doing the various manga adaptations. All the people at the publishing house.

Then there's the marketing and distribution folks—and of course all my readers.

Always, always: Thank you so much.

If I were to really trace back every person and thing I

have to be grateful for in the production of this book, I started to think it would lead me all the way back to the big bang. So you know what? Let's thank the big bang. Give the origin of the universe a hand, everybody!

And so there you have it, another story—as ever, I continue to write purely what amuses me. I think urban adventures are pretty cool, so all of a sudden, we found ourselves running through the shadows, but well, you know.

What about next time? I expect a story in which goblins appear and Goblin Slayer has to slay them. I'm thinking it's about time to set one of these in a desert, but the best-laid plans of mice and men and all. We'll see. I just think adventurers are a good fit for a desert. Like, you know how there was that legendary doer of deeds? You've just got to get out to a desert at least once.

Huh, talking like that, it sounds like we're in for a redux of the snowy mountain. Hoo-hoo, scary.

Anyhow, I'll be very happy if you enjoy the next volume as well.

Till next time!

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